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Vol. 28, No. 82 March, 1938

WESTERN ROMANCES

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ARTHUR LAWSON, Editor

A GLAMOROUS NOVEL

RUSTLER'S ROMANCE . . . . . William Fargo 40

Range-detective Sue Crawford was scorned by love and luck when she rode that mystery-shadowed country in search of her father's murderer—and *her* man!

Three Thrilling Novelettes

LOVE'S TRAIL TO HELL . . . . . Marian O'Hearn 10

When sweethearts are lonely and their trails lead to a Gun-Hell, is the courage of love their only salvation?

MUSTANG BLOOD . . . . . Edgar L. Cooper 96

She came from the night, asking only for love, but leading Wade Austin inevitably into the gunflame of her own owlhoot henchmen.

BORDER SWEETHEARTS . . . . . William Freeman Hough 130

Her lawman sweetheart came to capture the border smugglers—but love captured him!

Stirring Short Stories and Features

LOVE IS LOCO . . . . . Clay Kaar 31

A lobo-bachelor girl may be hard to lasso—but it's all in knowing how to tie a love-knot.

THE HE-MAN'S WORLD . . . . . S. Omar Barker 39

Gals may be good for nothing—but can even a cowboy git along without 'em?

THE LARIAT OF LIFE . . . . . Rodellin 82

Birth numbers and the stars above tell your future fortune.

THE TRAIL TO NOWHERE . . . . . Beatrice Jones 84

It was a love-trail, winding into a paradise on earth for them until gun-smoke and lead shattered their dreams of romance.

HEARTBREAK TRAIL . . . . . Westmoreland Grey 118

Bonnie's love couldn't surmount that barrier which hid her sweetheart's murderous past.

WESTERN CROSSWORD PUZZLE . . . . . Ella Riddle 140

A memory tickler to test your knowledge of the west.

JOAN REMINGTON'S ROUNDUP 142

A roundup of saddlepards who are interested in exchanging letters.

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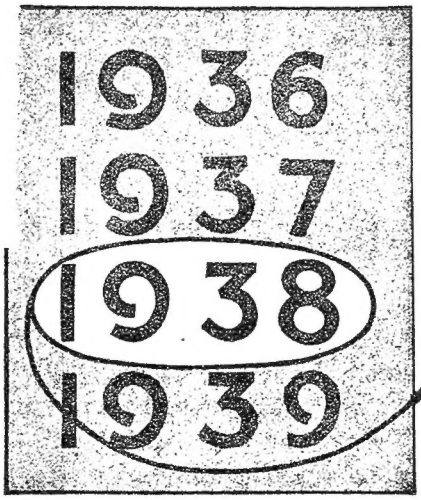

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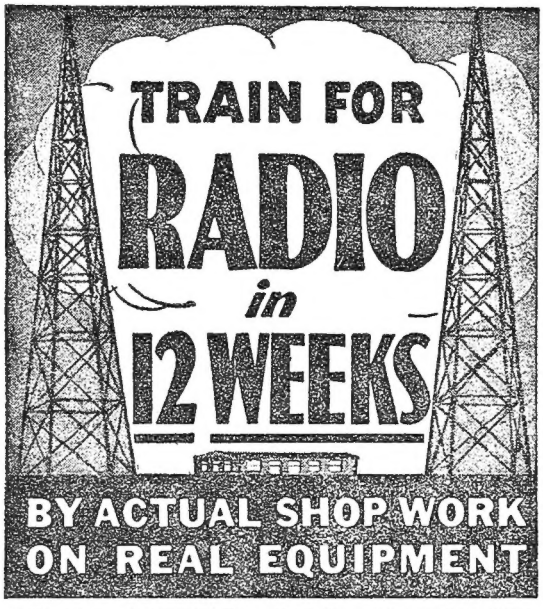

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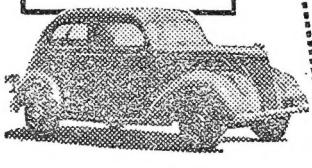

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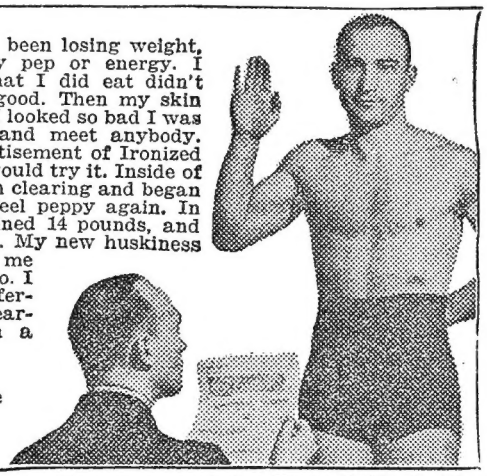

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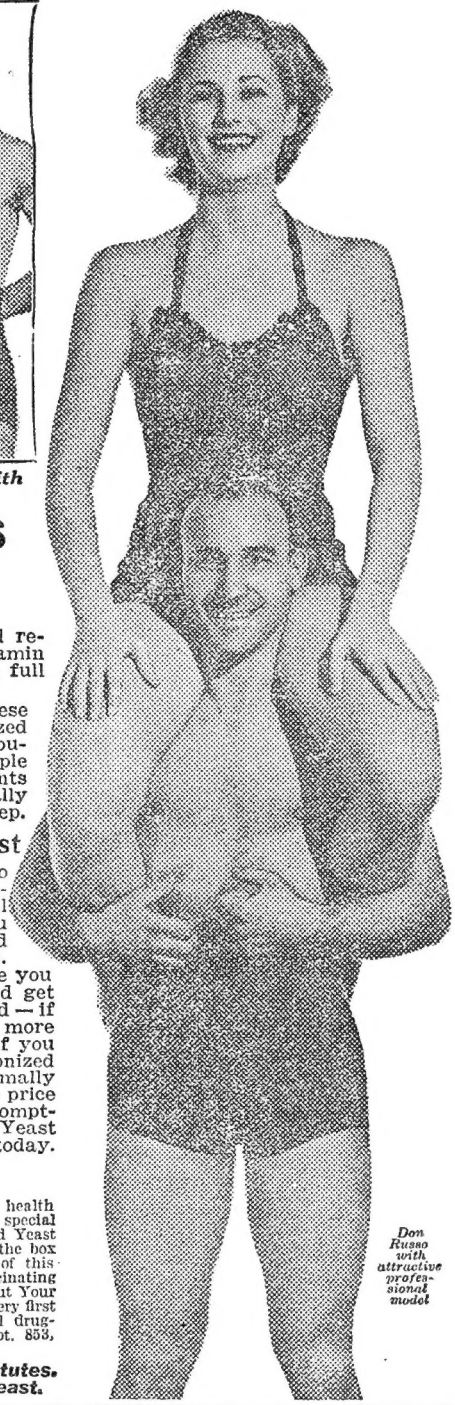


Don Russo with attractive professional model

A STIRRING NOVELETTE OF RANGELAND LOVE

"Take your hands off, Kingsley. Stay right where you are, Mister Herrick," Dan Leighton's voice snapped from the doorway.

CHAPTER I
Wild One

FAY HERRICK pulled in before the Western State Bank, but instead of dismounting, she waited until Wild One got through dancing away from the hitch rack. Keeping the reins taut, she murmured reassuringly to the great, black gelding.

His small ears lifted and he became quiet. Fay smiled but then, as she became aware of the people on the sidewalk, the smile died. Some of them were watching her curiously, the others coolly, but all of the staring eyes were unfriendly.

She knew what they were thinking —what the Pocatello citizens thought. She was Wally Herrick's sister and Wally Herrick was wanted for murder and also had held up this same bank a year ago.

Under the staring eyes, she deliberately lifted her head and squared her slim shoulders, and—became poignantly lovely. The slim, flaming-haired girl on the back of the magnificent black horse made an entrancing picture.

LOVE'S TRAIL TO HELL

BY MARIAN O'HEARN

When the stranger rode in from the Border Kay Herrick was only a helpless pawn in the hands of her uncle's hirelings. Then new-found love brought courage to her fighting heart though the trail the lonely sweethearts rode still seemed to lead to Hell!

Getting out of the saddle, she trailed Wild One's reins, but hesitated, painfully conscious of her clothing. Clothes didn't matter much out on the range, but in town they became noticeable. Her topless denim overalls were old and faded, her flannel shirt patched, her boots hopelessly worn. Even her hat was battered.

Well, after next week everything would be different. Then she would be of age and could claim her share of the Double Spur.

She started for the doors of the bank but stopped again as wildly beating hoofs slid to a halt and Tim Kingsley leaned from the saddle of a lathered pony.

"Just a minute there, Fay!"

She did not speak, but her gray eyes narrowed angrily and blood began to beat into her cheeks. Tim Kingsley was foreman of the Double Spur. He had been hired two years before by her Uncle Fred and for months he had been her shadow. Whenever she at-

tempted to leave the home ranch Kingsley was beside her—or close behind.

"I'll see you later," she said, trying to keep her voice quiet. "I have something to look after."

"Better see me—now," he snapped, indifferent to the interested witnesses who were halting to listen. "Besides, don't leave Wild One untied—want to start trouble?"

"Wild One's all right. Just don't bother him."

Kingsley twisted in the saddle to look down at her, and his dark eyes were like metal which once had been burned white. A huge man, he suddenly seemed a symbol of everything that had happened to Fay Herrick during the last year. Dark, and so powerful that even his conventional range clothes seemed a part of his vast physique. His head, as massively scaled as his body, was thatched with stiff, short hair. Nobody in the Pocatellos knew anything about Kingsley. He had simply arrived from nowhere to take charge of the ranch.

But now he dominated the Double Spur and the old outfit had been replaced by his own men—men as unknown as himself.

Impatiently, he nudged his mount toward the hitch-rack and reached for Wild One's reins.

"Don't touch him!" Fay cried in panic and sprang toward the big pony.

The black gelding reared crazily, his steel-shod hoofs lifting. The foreman cursed, dropped from his own saddle and swung his quirt.

The girl saw nothing more than that, for suddenly blind with fury, she was throwing herself at the man. Catching his arm, she tried to wrench the reins from him. Wild One was fighting desperately, and in another second he would plunge over anything before him.

"Let go!" Fay gasped, still struggling to free the reins. "He'll trample you—"

She twisted past the foreman to catch the pony's cheek strap.

"Easy—" she said hurriedly. "Easy, boy—"

But he reared again and his fore hoofs were starting to smash down. Fay was directly before him, in the way of those deadly hoofs. As she realized that, a hand closed on her arm and jerked her back to safety. Then Wild One leaped forward and plunged down the narrow street.

FAY stared after him until a sob broke from her shaking lips. Wild One was gone. She had spent weeks in gentling him after the men on the ranch had given him up as too "loco" for a saddle horse. And because he would permit no one else to handle him, he had been hers—about the only thing in the world which was really her own.

"If you'd only let him alone!" She turned with sudden, furious tears in her eyes.

But it was not the foreman who was still at her side with a hand on her arm. It was a man she did not know—a tall man whose big frame seemed almost gaunt under clothes which were not of the Pocatello country. He was watching the gelding careen down the street and his eyes were narrowed until the lashes made them seem smoky.

"That's a horse," he murmured, as if he were speaking to himself.

"Yes. But now he's gone back to the range—I'll never find him again."

The man looked down at her and she discovered that his eyes were blue. His glance made her realize the old black Stetson had fallen from her head and that her hair was tumbling about her shoulders.

"Your hair's like flame, ma'am—only not red flame. More like—"

He stopped as Tim Kingsley thrust his huge body between them.

"Take my pony and start for home, Fay," the foreman ordered. "Your

uncle sent me to bring you back."

"No." The girl looked up into Kingsley's face. "I'm not going home yet."

She turned toward the bank door, but Kingsley strode past her, to bar the way.

"I said your uncle wants you at home. He worries when you're running around the country, 'specially since all the trouble with Wally—"

Fay shut her teeth, hard. Suddenly, she wanted to close her fist and drive it straight into Kingsley's face. Wouldn't he or her Uncle ever stop talking of Wally? Were they afraid someone in the world might not know?

"I'm going into the bank," she said. "After that, I'll start for the Double Spur."

"Better start now."

He remained standing before her, but his eyes had changed. They were lighting, as if burnt-out fires were kindling to new life. He was staring at her tumbled hair, sweeping his glance up over her throat and face.

The warmth in her cheeks was beating like a pulse but she stepped forward as if to force her way past. He caught her arm—only to drop it at once.

The stranger was standing beside him—prodding a gun into his back.

"You heard her say she didn't want to go home."

Kingsley seemed to freeze—and Fay almost felt the same sense of frozen shock. Men didn't pull guns on Tim Kingsley!

Suddenly, the lines of the foreman's big body seemed to relax.

"Just who do you happen to be, hombre?" he asked, too mildly.

The other man bent a little as he spoke.

"Maybe you can—remember. The name is Dan Leighton."

His tone was even colder than Kingsley's eyes—the kind of tone which a man has to back up with his guns.

Fay's gaze raced over him once more—over the tall, sparely-fleshed frame. His thrusting chin was cleft. His smoky lashes were narrowed. Again she realized that he was not of this part of the range, for his thin leather chaps were metal-studded and his vest gleamed with silver tracings. The spurs on his high-heeled boots glistened and there was a metal band on his tall-crowned Stetson. Men of the Pocatello country did not go in for such ornamentation—nor for the spring holsters which held a Colt against each thigh.

Kingsley had not spoken—nor moved! But his face had changed, had taken on a look of looseness as though his jaw had gone slack. Then he said, too swiftly. "The name doesn't mean anything to me, brother. I'm foreman of the Double Spur and my boss sent me to bring his niece back to the ranch."

"Doesn't seem like she wants to go."

Leighton's tone was unchanged. His gun was still against Kingsley's side, but he glanced up at Fay and smiled.

"Go ahead, ma'am. Guess he won't be taking you home, after all."

She moved automatically, her hand reaching for the door of the bank. Then she stopped to look back. Kingsley was walking toward the hitch-rack with Leighton. They were close together and the gun was still nudging the foreman. As she watched, the two men swung into their saddles and headed down the street toward the north trail—in the same direction Wild One had taken. Kingsley rode in the lead, with Leighton behind him. Leighton still held the Colt.

A CLERK opened the door of the bank president's office and Michael Dalton, who was one of the best known lawyers in the district, as well as head of the bank, got to his feet.

"Well—Fay! Didn't think I was lucky enough to have you visit me. Sit down—sit down."

The girl took the chair he offered, and then pushing the tumbled, brilliant hair away from her face, looked up at him. Her gray eyes were sky clear and her sensitive mouth was the color of Paint flowers.

"Isn't it about time I saw you?" she smiled. "I'll be of age next week, Mr. Dalton—that means I'll inherit half the Double Spur. Since you have charge of my father's will I thought I'd better talk to you."

Thin streaks of color banded the elderly banker's cheeks.

"But—I don't understand, Fay. Your brother inherited the Double Spur."

"Why—he inherited his half. But he was twenty-one over a year ago. He told me I'd get my share when I was of age."

Dalton sat down in the chair before his desk.

"Then he didn't tell you the truth. You were not left half the ranch. Your father's will left it outright to Wally, with the stipulation that he was to divide the property as he saw fit when you were of age. Your uncle was appointed guardian—he's still your guardian and executor of the estate. You'd better talk to him."

Fay watched the lines of color reaching up Dalton's cheeks, and at last said unbelievingly:

"Are you telling me I can't inherit because Wally's—gone?"

"Something like that."

"I don't believe you—why, my father wouldn't have done that to me! What's happening to the Double Spur? Who's getting the income from the ranch? Who's controlling it?"

"Don't get so excited, Fay. You know your uncle is running the ranch. He's your guardian. Wally has no legal rights now because he's wanted —an outlaw."

"Maybe he's wanted but he's not an outlaw. You're like my Uncle and Tim Kingsley—they never stop talking about his being an outlaw. But I'm sure he didn't do the things he was accused of."

Dalton shot to his feet. "There's no sense in this. Why don't you talk to your uncle? I've told you what's in the will. You don't inherit any part of the ranch—it was all left to your brother."

"I have a right to my father's estate, too!"

The banker nodded, but his eyes were grim. "Sure, if you've got ways and means of fighting through the courts. Your brother can't even go into court for you—he has no standing in any court in the land."

Fay stood. "So that's how it is. I can do nothing and expect nothing. My uncle runs the Double Spur as if it were his—or lets Tim Kingsley run it. He doesn't even give me enough money to buy decent clothes, and whenever I try to speak, I'm reminded of Wally's 'disgrace'."

"Well?" she cried. "You were my father's friend and you let this happen—you even believe what they say about Wally, although you know he couldn't hold up a bank."

"I happen to know he did. I don't like telling you this, Fay, but I saw him kill the cashier of this bank."

"You—saw him—?"

"Yes." Dalton nodded heavily. "I was here when the shooting started. I ran into the outer office and saw Wally backing out the door with the money he'd taken from the safe. I yelled and Jackson, the cashier, jumped for him. He shot Jackson dead."

"You—"

But her words died to a whisper and she stared at him with dazed eyes.

She managed to speak at last. "I knew Wally better than anyone else in the world. He couldn't have done it."

"Stop being crazy, Fay. I saw him. If it had been just the holdup, I'd have kept still. But you can't keep still about murder."

"Then you were the one who—accused him."

"I had to. He killed a man."

CHAPTER II
A Rattler Strikes

BUT the girl was no longer listening. She was crossing to the door, moving through the big outside banking room. She was walking stiffly, as if her legs were made of wood.

At the outer door she paused, with her shoulders sagging and her young eyes hopeless. Her Uncle Fred, Tim Kingsley, and Michael Dalton—

She stared through the thick glass at the street and remembered Wally. He was only a year and a half older than herself and they had been closer than most brothers and sisters. He had told her, only a few days before he had fled from the country, branded an outlaw, that their father's will had divided the ranch between them, each to receive their share when they came of age.

"He was telling the truth," she said half aloud. "Uncle Fred and Michael Dalton have done this—they made an outlaw of Wally—to get the Double Spur. I should have asked to see the will—"

But her shoulders sagged even more. She didn't have a chance against them. If Wally were here—

She opened the door—and then her head suddenly lifted, her gray eyes became sky clear. They had branded her brother an outlaw and were trying to take the ranch. They wouldn't succeed—even if she had to follow her brother onto the outlaw trail! She would get the truth from her uncle at gun point if necessary, and then she would find Wally!

Outside, she ran down the steps and then stopped short before the hitch-rack. For Wild One was there, waiting, under trailed reins. And beside him, in the saddle of a sturdy, long-legged dun, was Dan Leighton.

"I brought him back, ma'am."

"But—how? Nobody, except myself, has ever been able to manage him—and when he's running there's not a horse on the range that can catch up with him."

"Except mine."

But he grinned as he said it, and she liked his grin. "Never found anything could show my pony his dust for long."

Fay caught Wild One's cheek-strap and stroked his silken nose. "I've really got you back," she crooned. "I didn't think I'd ever seen you again."

She glanced up at the man. "Losing Wild One would have—been too much."

"Yeah—you looked like that when he lit out. But now—" He paused.

"You look as if you're hunting the fastest trail to hell."

"I am."

She straightened and the glow left her face. "After I find the trail to hell, it'll lead some place else. So, I'm saying goodbye. You know how I feel about your bringing Wild One back."

"I can guess."

Impulsively she put out her hand. "I'll always remember it."

But his hard fingers clung tenaciously to hers.

"Maybe we're riding the same way. Doesn't seem like things should end this way—just howdy and *adios.*"

She glanced up at him and then freed her hand.

"That's the way it's got to be, though. Goodbye."

She lifted the reins and swung into the saddle.

"Wait." Dan Leighton put his hand on Wild One's neck and the big pony remained quiet under his touch. "You're heading for trouble. Anything I can do?"

Fay hesitated and then she once more noticed the guns in the spring holsters against his thighs.

"Yes, I need a gun and—you've got two."

He held up one of the Colts. "Here it is—and good luck."

"Thanks."

She thrust the gun into the pocket of her denim trousers and backed Wild One from the hitch-rack. Giving him his head she pounded down the street toward the trail to Long Step Valley.

It was only when the gelding stretched out for the last long run across the valley that she remembered Dan Leighton leading Tim Kingsley away at the point of his gun.

She had wanted to ask him about that—and about Kingsley's unbelievable fear.

"Dan Leighton." She murmured his name to hear the sound of it and her lips curved into a smile.

IN spite of Wild One's mile-eating pace, the sun had set and streamers of dusk were drifting over the Double Spur as she rode into the yard. The ranch seemed unusually quiet and she glanced around, expecting to find Tim Kingsley waiting for her. But, except for three men busy around the corrals, there was no one in sight.

She dismounted before the house and went up the steps with her hand holding the Colt in her pocket. Her uncle was going to tell her the truth, at last.

Inside, she moved toward the door of the living room from where an oblong of light cut into the gloom of the hall.

"Uncle Fred."

Her voice sounded taut in her own ears. The man glanced up hastily and as he got to his feet he seemed to be bracing the thin body on which the clothes hung too loosely. His small head was thrust forward on a long neck, and his eyes fixed on her.

She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. She felt for the key but there was none in the lock. "We need to have a talk, Uncle Fred—and not about Wally's disgracing the family. I went to see Mr. Dalton and he said I don't inherit any part of the ranch. Just who does the ranch belong to, now that Wally's gone, and where is the money going?"

The man's eyes seemed to take on greater fullness.

"The ranch belongs to your brother, but I'm still executor of the estate—if it's any of your business, which it isn't. That's all I'm going to say. I tried to bring you and your brother up right and the result is that one's an outlaw and the other—"

"Stop right there."

Fay's hand dropped and swept the Colt from her pocket.

"I don't believe either you or Michael Dalton. Now, start telling the truth."

Fred Herrick sank into the chair behind him. Fay stepped back—and then whirled too late. The door had opened so swiftly that even as she heard it Tim Kingsley was in the room, leaping toward her. Her thumb squeezed the gun hammer but he struck her arm up and the Colt roared, sending the bullet into the ceiling.

His huge hands clamped on her arms and then he crushed her against him, almost stopping her breath.

"Kind of figured you'd be looking for trouble," he said, twisting the weapon from her hand. "Tried to keep you away from Dalton but you're too red-headed to be taught anything—the easy way."

She twisted desperately. "Uncle Fred—tell him to let me go!" she gasped.

Fred Herrick regarded her with unblinking eyes.

"Seems like you were going to kill me a minute ago. Anyhow, Tim won't hurt you—he's been talking to me about marrying you. Maybe it's the best chance Wally Herrick's sister will ever have."

Fay once more lunged against Kingsley's arms.

"There are—plenty of rattlers—if I need a husband that bad."

"Take your hands off, Kingsley. Stay right where you are, *Mister* Herrick."

Dan Leighton's voice snapped from the doorway and Kingsley's smothering grip relaxed. Fay stumbled away from him, breathing with sobbing effort.

Leighton stood just inside the room and there was a leveled Colt in his hand. His tall, sparely-fleshed body was as lightly poised as a dancer's.

"I told you to be real quiet-like, Tim, and not bother Miss Herrick."

"*You* told me—say—" Kingsley swayed forward, although his broad face was once more turning slack. "You're not giving orders here. If you try it—"

"What?" Leighton broke in, his eyes even narrower.

But suddenly Fay moved. She was remembering that the explosion of her gun must have been heard by the men at the corrals.

"Get out of here, quick," she called to Leighton. "Hurry—I'm going with you—"

Her words were cut off, broken by the crash of guns—two of them barking in unison from the window. Leighton crouched and his Colt snapped an answer. Then his Colt flashed toward Kingsley just as the foreman was pulling down. There was another hoarse explosion and Kingsley dropped. Sliding to his knees, he snatched at his fallen gun with his left hand.

The waddies at the windows began to fan their revolvers and Fay caught Dan Leighton's arm.

"Hurry—through the front door," she begged. "This is our best chance."

His glance touched hers and then he began to move backward, his gun roaring at the men at the windows.

They were in the hall. And there were only seconds in which to get out of the house. "Wild One's just below the steps." Fay whispered breathlessly.

Together, they sprang through the door and raced down to the yard where, without breaking his stride, he lifted her into the saddle of the waiting pony. Then he was up behind her.

"My pony's down the trail, just beyond the curve," he said. "After that we'll head north. This is dangerous for you, ma'am—but I figure it may not be as bad as staying here."

"Can't be." She fed out the reins until the gelding seemed to be flying.

A gun snarled, but then they were out of the gates and on the trail. It would not take more than a few minutes for Kingsley and the men to saddle. And powerful as Wild One was, he could not carry double for long.

The gelding was running smoothly,

apparently not yet conscious of his extra burden. The trail snaked sharply away from the Double Spur and twisted upward.

"Cut off the trail—through that brush."

Wild One dived for the brush as if he sensed the terrible necessity of the moment. Then Fay saw the waiting dun pony and Leighton dropped from behind her.

"Head north—I'll be right with you. Straight north to the end of Short Step Valley. We'll angle through the hills toward the Jackson Horn."

But she pulled in to listen. Just as Leighton swung into the saddle of the dun, she caught the high roar of hoofs. Kingsley and the waddies were not far behind.

"Ready?" The man demanded. "It's going to be a long ride."

For answer she let out the reins—let them out as long as Wild One would take them, and he seemed to be skimming over the earth.

But Leighton's pony kept pace. He was always there, abreast, taking Wild One's fastest stride.

He was carrying her brother's saddle-bags!

DAN LEIGHTON drew in at the crest of a squat hill that was like a step to the adjoining peak. "Down there—" gesturing to the land below, which was brilliantly lighted by the lately risen moon, "Is Indigo Pass and beyond it is a place where we can hide out in safety for a while."

Fay turned with her gray glance going suddenly sharp.

"You know the Pocatello country? I thought you were a stranger here."

He did not look at her and it was a long moment before he spoke. Then he said:

"No ma'am—never been here before, but I was given directions and maps so I could get around."

"Maps of these hills? What's the hideout beyond the pass?"

But he lifted the reins of his pony and rode down trail. "Let's get going, ma'am."

She sent Wild One after him and did not speak until they had ridden, single-file, through Indigo Pass, emerging into a sheltered pocket of land which she had known all of her life—a tiny space containing a stoutly built section bunkhouse.

Leighton made straight for the log building and Fay wondered if he knew that the abandoned bunkshed belonged to the Double Spur.

He got out of the saddle and pushed open the door. Light flared inside a minute later.

Fay dropped to the ground. "How did you know about this place?"

But he began to lead the ponies away as if he had not heard her. In the doorway, she looked after him, noticing that the moonlight rippled off the silver tracings on his clothes

and flashed against the guns at his thighs.

If he had never before been in the Pocatello, someone had instructed him carefully about the topography of the country. And there were very few people who would know of the abandoned section house, although she and Wally had come here as children.

UNEASILY, she turned into the big, bare room, her glance traveling over it in recognition. Kindling wood was stacked beside the rusty stove and she started a fire, listening for the sound of Leighton's return.

But she was not aware of his presence until he spoke, standing in the doorway.

"Got the makings of supper here," he said, lifting the saddle bags he was carrying. "Don't believe in traveling far without food."

For a second, Fay felt something like fear as she stared at him. He had returned so silently! And now, as he stood before her, there was a steely alertness about him.

He carried the saddle-bags to the table, and then the girl bent forward with her breath stopping, tangling into a knot in her throat. Stamped on the saddle-bags were the initials: "W. H."

W. H.—Wallace Herrick! What was Leighton doing with them?

Her glance lifted to his dark face. He had come here a stranger and made his way unhesitatingly to the section house above Indigo Pass. And he was carrying her brother's saddlebags!

In that small part of a second, realization was a white flash of terror. Then she darted forward, caught the butt of one of his guns and flipped it from the holster.

"Don't move," she said, facing him. "I'll take the other gun—and then you can sit down."

Slowly, she reached for the second Colt, looking up into his face as she did so. His eyes were narrowed, but he smiled.

"You know, ma'am, you look, just now, as if you were made of fire and marble. I never saw hair like yours."

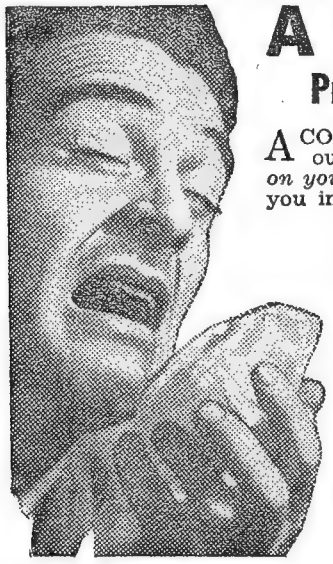
Holding the guns, she stepped back.

"You gave me a Colt this afternoon, but you still have two."

He nodded. "I always have an extra one around—in case of trouble."

"You're meeting the trouble right now. Where did you get those saddle-bags? They belonged to Wally, my brother."

He nodded. "That's right. I'll tell you about it. I'd intended to wait a while."



A HEALTH WARNING!

Printed in the interest of public well-being!

A COLD is nothing to trifle with! It may easily lead to more serious troubles. The moment you begin sniffling and sneezing, *be on your guard!* Doctors have laid down a few simple rules to help you in your fight against colds:

Stay out of crowds. Get plenty of rest. Drink lots of water. Keep your body warm. Keep your feet dry. And *keep regular!*

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"But—then you know him? Is he still alive? Or did you—?"

"No, I didn't kill him. The kid's the best friend I've had in a long time. I was in a bar in Durango about a year ago when a fagged pony stopped at the door, with an unconscious man in the saddle. It was your brother. He'd been traveling for days with a gunshot wound in his shoulder. I took him out to my ranch and kept him there until he was well. He wouldn't talk much for a long time. But a few weeks ago he opened up and told me about things up here—mentioned Tim Kingsley—and I happened to know Tim. So I rode up for a look around."

"Does he know he's supposed to have held up the Western State Bank —and killed the cashier?"

"Yeah, he knows that. But he didn't even have a gun that afternoon. He went to the bank to talk to Dalton about his father's will. There was a ruckus outside and they saw somebody—somebody running—and then a gun cracked and the cashier dropped. Dalton told Wally to leave, but when the kid got home, Dalton showed up and said Wally robbed the bank. Dalton and Fred Herrick gave him just one chance to keep his neck out of a noose—to start for the border. He started—but less than a rod from the ranch somebody shot him. He kept on going."

Fay moved forward with her eyes widening, her young face lighting as though a flame glowed behind the flesh.

"I knew it," she said. "I knew Wally hadn't held up the bank. When did you see him last? How is he?"

Leighton's glance changed and became intent. "Keep on looking like that," he said softly. "Because that's the way I'd like to remember you, just in case—"

"Just in case. . . ?"

"That I have to leave you in a hurry."

"You can't!" she said swiftly. "If you went now—but you can't leave me!"

Abruptly, there was a stillness between them; a quiet, pregnant with sudden emotion. As if they were discovering each other—realizing they only had to lift their hands to release madness.

Leighton bent over her and his eyes seemed black.

"Did I hear right? You don't want me to leave you?"

Fay, with the blood beating into her cheeks, tried to turn away. But he caught her hands and held her. "The answer to that is important—to me."

"Important—?" she asked questioningly, her voice stumbling. His hands tightened commandingly. He was waiting for words she did not wish to say. But then she heard herself saying them: "I don't want you to leave me."

"Fay." He murmured her name like a man saying a prayer.

Then she was in his arms, and he was whispering, "I didn't want this to happen—yet. I knew, as soon as I saw you, that it had to happen sometime. But now—"

"But now it's done," she whispered.

"Yes." His arms closed, and became possessive. Then his lips touched hers gently, taking their first shy kiss.

His hands strayed to her hair. "When I first saw you, it was like fire without smoke—all gold—and your eyes looked as if you were asking the world to draw."

"Maybe I was. But none of that seems to matter any longer. The only thing that's still important is knowing the truth about Wally—"

Then Dan's kiss was on her mouth again and even the thought of her brother was gone.

CHAPTER III
Death Calls!

FAY awakened with a feeling of terror. Sitting upright on the bunk, she stared around the big,

empty room, which was filling with the murky light of dawn. On a bunk at the farther end of the section house she could see the blanketed outline of Dan Leighton, who was apparently still asleep.

Again her glance swept over the room. Something had aroused her—she heard the sound once more, a thin, tiny creak of hinges. The door was opening—opening slowly.

In sudden terror, she started to call Leighton, but then she closed her lips against his name. Stepping to the floor she started noiselessly toward his bunk. The night before she had returned both his guns and now she would have to awaken him or find one of his Colts.

Carefully, her eyes on the door, she took another step. The opening crack widened—and she stopped.

A young, slender man entered the room. A fair youth with a flat-crowned Stetson pulled low over his face. In his hand was a heavy gun, but the fingers holding it were not steady. One side of his light shirt was stained with blood.

"Wally!"

The hand holding the gun lowered and some of the gray pallor left his face.

"Fay—," he said and tried to smile. "I expected to find Dan Leighton here. How did you—"

She ran toward him.

"You're hurt — what happened? Why did you come back?"

"I'm all right. I've got to find Dan Leighton. He's expecting me—"

"He's here." She gestured toward the blanketed form on the bunk across the room. "Sit down and let me look at that wound. You must have—" she paused, and her hands tightened on his arm. "You ran into Jim Kingsley's men!"

"Yeah—and they're headed this way. Dan . . ." Wally pulled away from her and strode to the bunk. "Roll out."

There was no movement from the bunk—and suddenly Fay realized the blanketed form was too still. But as she started forward, Wally jerked at the blankets. They came away, revealing pillows and saddle-bags arranged to resemble the outline of a man.

He whirled and looked at her with the gray pallor of his face deepening. "If he's gone—"

"Not yet, Kid."

Leighton's level voice sounded from the door. "I fixed that bunk so Fay wouldn't feel alone if she woke up. Then I went outside to make sure nobody crept up on us in the dark. I recognized you and let you come in—" He broke off and moved into the room. "You need some attention from the looks of things. Lie down and I'll clean up your shoulder."

"No." Wally straightened with an effort. "There isn't time. Now, listen, Dan—this is a bad wound all right—too bad for me to do any more riding. You and Fay get your ponies and ride—Kingsley may get here any minute."

"That's where you got the bullet?" Leighton demanded. "How'd you run into them?"

"They must have heard me coming—they were hiding in the brush and when I got near enough, they blasted away. I didn't head straight for this place, did a lot of circling around in case they were following, but still the chances are they stuck to my trail. Besides, once Kingsley saw me in these hills, he'd think of looking here—I'm sure he knows about it."

Wally broke off and fighting to hold himself erect, snapped: "Get going. Maybe you can make it—"

The words trailed off again and his legs buckled under him. He sank to the floor, and Fay saw a thin stream of blood running down his hand from his arm. Before she could reach his side, Dan Leighton was bending over him.

"Take it easy, kid," he said gently.

"I'll get you on the bunk and fix you up."

Wally's face was paper-white, his half-opened eyes looked glazed, and a new terror struck at Fay. But as Leighton started to lift him, he suddenly jerked away and swung up his gun.

"I might just as well kill you, Dan, as let you get hanged. I'll do it, too, if you don't get out with Fay. You came here on my account and if I have to shoot you I'll keep your neck out of a noose."

Leighton hesitated, his eyes narrowed against those of the boy.

"Are you starting? Wally demanded.

Dan stepped back, balancing his tall body.

"Yeah, sure," he murmured and—leaped, crashing into Wally. He caught the youth's arms and twisted the gun from his hand. Then he lifted the half unconscious boy onto a bunk.

Fay, tearing her eyes away from her brother's bloodless face, hurried across the kitchen to the big water bucket which Leighton had filled the night before. But as she poured water into a pan, Leighton took it out of her hands.

"No time for that," he said. "Get the horses and bring them to the door, Fay."

She started to speak, but then the words stopped. There was nothing of Wally's desperation on him, but there was something infinitely more threatening, for his face was like a mask of steel.

"Hurry," he said, his voice crisp as that of a stranger.

She looked up at him, into a face she didn't know. A few hours ago she had promised him her love—had given him her lips. But did she know what he was?

Turning away, she went outside and ran across the clearing to the ponies. Hastily taking off the hobble-chains, she saddled both horses and led them back to the bunk-shed. Then trailing the reins, she went inside.

Leighton was bending over Wally and as she entered he glanced up that blank, steeliness on his face.

"Stay with him for a minute," he said. "I'm going to need some ropes."

"But—"

"Fay." He stopped and took her into his arms. "You've got to do what I tell you—and do it fast. We'll get Wally tied to a pony and take him out of here." Before she could speak, he bent and kissed her—a fierce, breathless kiss. Then he whirled toward the door and jerked it open. It slammed after him—and a second later a gun roared.

TIM KINGSLEY had already found them! They were caught in the pocket without a chance of escape, for the only exit was through the pass.

Fay threw open the door. Dan Leighton was crouching below the cover of the brush with both his guns leveled. A bullet hissed from the pass and his weapons barked together. Half a dozen bullets sang an answer.

"Dan!" The word tore from her throat—a shrill, terrible cry of fear.

Dan was bareheaded and the dawn light glinted against his dark hair. He looked grim and unyielding as the hills above him. Knowing there was no chance of escape, he was still fighting as if he could not lose!

As she looked at him, a sudden, chill calm descended upon her. She knew she would also face hopelessness like that—as if there were no such thing as defeat.

Whirling, she turned back into the section house and took one of the guns from Wally's belt which Leighton had placed on a chair beside the bed. Then she ran outside and crossed the pocket to Dan's side.

Dropping to her knees behind the brush, she waited until bullets again spat from the pass. Then, taking aim

with utterly steady fingers, she pressed down on the hammer.

As her gun roared, Dan jumped toward her. "Go back inside," he snapped, "and stay there."

She did not take time to answer, merely squeezed the gun hammer again as a man's head showed at the mouth of the pass. She was not sure how long she knelt there working the Colt. It seemed unending hours.

DAN'S guns were blasting steadily and with a sudden return of fear, she glanced desperately over the pocket-like valley which was their prison, seeking a solution to their predicament. She knew that the only way out was through the pass. On two of the remaining sides, were sheer rock cliffs. The third, behind the section house, was a brushed slope, but still too steep for a horse to climb. A man, working desperately, might fight his way up with his hands and feet—

A pulse of hope stirred the blood against her wrists. That slope could be climbed afoot! They still might get away!

But then she knew the idea was impossible. For, if they started the slow, laborious climb they would be picked off from below before they were half-way up. Besides, there was Wally, dangerously wounded and unconscious.

"Fay—run for the house!"

Dan was sinking to his knees, and a broad red stain was widening over his chest. He was still working his guns—working them with shaking, unsteady hands. In new terror, she swung up her own weapon and fired again and again—shooting blindly. But then she saw three men rushing from the pass, snapping their revolvers as they came.

Desperately she pulled down the hammer of her gun and fanned it. The running men stopped—fell back into the cover of the pass. Dan was lifting his weapons again, but his face set with the effort. Perspiration was pouring down his cheeks and mingling with the blood from his wound.

Fay snapped another bullet toward the pass and then dropping to her knees beside Dan, put her free arm around him.

"We'll both try for the house. Keep one of your guns going, Dan—please, for me."

He nodded, and pulled himself up to his feet. Then, together, they began to back toward the building. Dan stumbled at every step, but he kept his gun flaming and Fay's roared as steadily. Slowly, they retreated to the bunkshed. Once inside, they could hold off Kingsley and his men a little longer. But it meant no more than that.

"Now—" the girl gasped, "we'll have to run."

They started toward the bunkshed and gained the door as lead spat into the wooden sill. Then they were inside.

LEIGHTON pushed the heavy bolt into place and knelt below one of the windows, smashing out the glass with his gun-butt. Fay took a place beside him for the only other window did not face the pass.

Four men were moving cautiously toward the building and she could see others behind them. She snapped back the hammer of her Colt and the first of the men swayed wildly, his arms clutching at space as he fell. But the others came on—and leading them was Tim Kingsley. He was crouching, running, seeking cover, roaring orders to the men behind.

They would be at the bunkshed in a few minutes, in spite of the singing guns at the window. Now, additional men were darting from the pass into the open.

It was hopeless. Suddenly, Fay slumped with that realization. But then she looked up at Dan and saw

that his face was once more like steel. In spite of his wound he was holding himself erect and firing steadily. Grimly meeting the end as he had met the beginning—without flinching.

Once more courage returned to her. She bent closer to the window, steadying her gun, and her glance swept over the scene outside, coming to rest on the waiting ponies. The ponies—

Her hand clenched on the Colt.

"Dan! We can't last more than another five minutes. The horses are outside the door. We'd better try to go up the slope in back of the bunkshed. We probably won't make it, but it won't be any worse than this. We —won't have to just stand and wait."

He turned and looked down at her, shaking his head. But as their eyes met, his glance lighted.

"You might make it, at that—I'll get Wally onto my pony. Tie him. You take Wild One and I'll hold 'em off long enough to give you a chance. Come on, Fay—" He caught her arm and stood up. "Help me with Wally."

"No."

She stopped and her pointed chin set with new hardness as she faced him. "I'm not leaving you here to be shot to pieces while we escape. We'll all go together. Put Wally on your pony and we'll both ride Wild One."

"That wouldn't work. The only chance is for me to hold 'em off for a few minutes more. Don't talk—there isn't time."

"I said no."

He straightened, looking at her with his blue eyes blazing with anger.

"So you want all of us to be killed! Your brother needs help—he's dying. Get him out of here—unless you're afraid!"

Her cheeks flamed but then she glanced across the room to Wally. He looked young and helpless—like a small boy. His cheeks seemed utterly bloodless. If she got him out now, he might live—and might escape a noose.

Smothering hands seemed to close over her heart. Wally was no longer her older brother. He was a hurt youngster who needed her and whom she could save if she would.

Her lips shook as she turned back to Dan.

"I—can't leave you. Dan, if I must choose between you and Wally, I haven't any choice. If this is the end, I have to be with you."

The command went out of his glance then, and he bent to kiss her. "I'm sorry, but you've got to go. You can't help me by staying. As far as I'm concerned just meeting you has been worth it. I might have lived for ninety years, but if I'd missed you, it wouldn't have been living. So," he gripped her shoulders with sudden fierceness, "goodbye, Fay."

Then he ran across the room and lifted Wally from the bunk.

"Bring those raw-hide cords I put on the table."

She caught up the raw-hide cords and helped him get Wally into the saddle. Then, while he tied him to the dun, she stood at his side and leveling her gun, sent a stream of bullets toward the pass.

"Now, get up on Wild One," Dan said.

She nodded and swung into the saddle. She dug her heels into the black gelding's flanks and sent him racing toward the impossibly steep slope. As the black's long legs stretched out for the first upward length, she twisted in the saddle. Kingsley's men were rushing the bunkshed, circling it. In another minute they would crash through the door—

CHAPTER IV
Death's Reward!

SHE reined in, then fastened the reins around the saddle-horn and swung her quirt against the dun's flanks. He started forward—up the slope. Wheeling Wild One, she turned back—riding straight for the cabin

and for the storm of lead which was beating into it from three sides.

As she neared the section-house, a man leaped from the brush, his gun flashing in the sunlight.

It was Tim Kingsley.

"Fay!" He shouted. "Go on through —ride for the pass—we're not trying to hurt you. All we want is Leighton and that crooked brother of your's."

Her heels dug harder into Wild One's flanks and his flying hoofs threatened to trample the man. Kingsley stumbled back, and then Fay was at the door.

"Dan," she cried. "Dan!"

He was at the window, his gun pumping steadily, his face set and expressionless.

"Go back to your brother . . ."

"I sent him up," she called, looking swiftly toward the slope where the dun was still climbing with his unconscious burden. "Now, if you won't leave with me—I'll stay with you."

His fingers squeezed at his guns again and once more his glance touched hers. And, at the end of that second, he nodded.

He came out the door with his Colts ready—his shirt front and vest covered with blood.

"Get up behind me."

The circle of guns about the cabin broke into a sudden blare of sound. Lead cut into the building and Wild One danced in terror. Fay steadied him as Dan swung up behind her.

"They're trying to ride up the mountain!" Tim Kingsley's voice bellowed. "Let 'em both have it—fast! Don't stop for the girl—she had her chance."

The guns coughed with a louder tempo and lead criss-crossed the beams of sunlight. Kingsley and his outfit were less than a rod away. Fay looked up the slope. The bay was still moving, but with dreadful slowness, fighting for each inch of ground. She sent Wild One toward the slope again and, as if understanding what he must do, the gelding raced forward, scrambling for footing, attempting to hold a running pace as he fought upward.

But almost at once he dropped into a laborious climb and strained under his heavy load. The dun, only a little farther up, was moving even more slowly. And then Fay saw it slip. Her teeth sank into her lower lip to hold back her cry, but the dun pulled himself up and went on.

Wild One was beginning to struggle for breath. His long, sleek shoulder muscles were knotting with effort and his hide was wet. But not once did he pause.

The guns below were closer. Bullets began to whang into the brush and glance off the rocks. But Dan Leighton was still returning their fire. One gun against a dozen—and they were not yet halfway up the slope.

Fay leaned forward and patted the gelding's damp neck. "Make it, Wild One," she said. "We've got to make it."

His muscles tightened even more and his breathing became louder. She could see the foam dripping from his mouth, could feel the strain tearing at every inch of his gallant body. But he did not turn his head. More than once he stepped aside for surer footing. Once, he slipped and seemed about to topple backwards, but he scrambled frantically onward, four hoofs fighting for balance—and finding it.

THEN they were more than halfway up. The dun was a little behind them. A bullet cracked into the brush—and then Fay realized that Leighton's gun was silent. She twisted around to look at him and he pressed her arm, smiling crookedly.

"No more bullets."

She handed him her own weapon, but he shook his head.

"Keep that—you may need it."

Try Avalon Cigarettes! Save several cents a pack! Cellophane wrap. Union made.

"If I don't need it now, I never will."

His mouth went thin and he nodded. He took the gun.

"Kingsley's starting up," he told her a minute later, "They're on foot—"

His words choked and stopped, and for a second Fay stared straight ahead, feeling that she was looking at the end of life. She could not turn—could not allow herself to know.

But finally she did turn, saw the gray of his face and the line of blood running down his cheek. He was fighting to hold on to consciousness, but his eyes were dull.

She placed both of his arms around her and with her free hand, held them there, directing Wild One with the other. Nothing to do now but wait—the top was not so far away. Beyond the crest was a mesa and once across it, they might leave Kingsley's crowd behind. Wild One, running double, would still be faster than most ponies.

Then Wild One seemed to gather his great body into an awful, convulsive knot. Fay could feel him shaking under her. Breath gushed from his nostrils, sounding like a human sob. Wild One had been shot.

"Oh, no—"

Her own sob echoed his and she reached out to touch his lathered neck. He shook his head—and went on.

The dun pony, carrying the unconscious Wally, was pressing ahead—was nearing the top, climbing over it. Wild One made another terrific effort and reached the rim.

Fay guided him toward the dun and catching up the lax reins, she started straight west, across the mesa. Wild One responded to her signal and settled down into a long, smooth stride.

The girl thought she could almost hear the pound of the gelding's great heart as he made his final, desperate run. On the ground, she glimpsed dots of red trailing them.

Tears poured down her face when Wild One stretched his neck, and then Dan Leighton spoke.

"Fay—this pony's hurt. Guess I've been out for a while. We'll have to stop. He can't carry us any farther."

"We can't stop—as long as he'll keep going. It's you and Wally—or Wild One."

Her sobs could no longer be suppressed and Dan gathered her into his arms.

"You keep going, with your brother," he said quietly. "But I'm getting down here."

"No—"

Then Wild One was stumbling. He was down on his knees and his breath was whistling from his throat.

Slipping out of the saddle. Fay knelt beside the black pony and lifted his head onto her lap. There was a little stream of red trickling from his mouth and his body was writhing.

"Wild One," she murmured and her voice broke.

"Fay." Dan Leighton, gray-faced and tight-lipped, caught her shoulders. "We've got to get off this mesa. You and Wally head south, down the slope. There's a canyon below that winds back toward Indigo Pass—"

She did not hear him. She was stroking Wild One's neck, and the pony, his eyes dulling, feebly nuzzled her fingers. Then a vast, rippling sigh shook him and he was utterly still.

LEIGHTON lifted her to her feet. "Please, Fay, can't you hear them? Kingsley's crowd didn't come up after us—they rode around through the pass and they'll find us in another five minutes."

He caught the reins of the dun. "Get up behind your brother—and ride."

She looked down at Wild One and then her glance lifted to Dan's face. "Leave you? Afoot, there isn't a chance."

"It's the only chance for you.

They'll see the dead pony and know you turned off near here. I can hold them long enough to let you get started."

"No." She straightened. "We'll stay together. You lead Wally's pony and if we can reach the canyon we may get away—that canyon wanders for miles. It won't be easy to find us."

"It'll be more than easy if we're afoot," he said grimly," and your brother's badly hurt."

"So are you. Dan, last night we promised we'd always be together. If you won't come with me, I'll stay here."

His strained eyes stared down at her, but suddenly his arms opened to hold her. She clung to him blindly, savoring every second of this tiny respite which they were snatching.

"All right." He released her and took the dun's reins. "Come on—fast."

They hurried south, leading the pony which carried Wally. Behind them, the roaring of hoofs grew louder. But when they reached the edge of the mesa, the going was faster for the slope was steep. They slid down, crashing into brush and rocks. The dun fought his way, bracing himself to keep from hurtling to the bottom.

When they reached the rocky-floored canyon, the girl was exhausted. There were brush scratches on her face and her clothing was torn. Their slow footsteps rang against the rock and the hoofs of the dun seemed thunderously loud.

"We'll have to go faster," she said. "But I can't keep up—much longer. There's a branch a little farther along. It leads north."

The canyon walls seemed to waver before her eyes, but she forced herself on and they turned into the tunnel-like branch of the canyon.

Dan's voice was hoarse. "Fay, we've made it—there's the end of the branch ahead."

She stopped, peering with dazed, uncomprehending eyes.

"We won't go outside. We'll camp here—maybe they didn't follow us. Might have missed our trail in the main canyon."

Leighton stopped the dun and began to lift Wally from the saddle. "The blanket—" he said.

Fay got the saddle off, spread the blanket on the ground and he placed Wally on it. Then, moving with the slowness of utter exhaustion, she ripped away her brother's shirt and bound the wound below his shoulder.

"You're hurt, too," she said, again noticing the grayness of Leighton's face. "I'll have to look after that head wound—"

The rock walls seemed to be bending, threatening to topple on her and the gloom of the canyon deepened.

Dan Leighton caught her as she swayed and lowered her to the floor of the canyon. Then, sitting with his back against the rock, he cradled her in his arms as he would have held a child. Sleep dropped over her at once. A heavy, fatigue-drugged sleep.

CHAPTER V
Love's Reckoning

WHEN Fay awakened, Dan was still holding her, although she knew that hours must have passed since she fell asleep, for the canyon was black with night. She stirred and sat up.

"Dan—how's Wally?"

"I think he's all right. He was sleeping when I last looked at him."

"You'd better see."

He got up and his heels clicked against the stone of the canyon floor. Then she heard a smothered exclamation and heard him scratch a match. The little blaze flared—and showed that Wally was gone!

Fay jerked to her feet. "They couldn't have taken him away like that—without our knowing!"

Leighton scratched another match and bent down to examine the ground. " 'They' didn't take him—he left on his own, honey. Bet the pony's missing, too."

He ran toward the mouth of the canyon and then she heard him turn back. "Yeah, he took the dun."

"Wally wouldn't do that—run away! Something has happened. We've got to find him."

"Sure, we have to find him. But he didn't run away—I've got an idea he headed for the ranch to see your uncle—probably figured he'd get to him and force the truth out of him."

"But he's so badly wounded—and Kingsley probably will be waiting at the Double Spur! He won't have a chance."

Leighton turned away. "I'm going to look for some ponies—bound to be some around these hills."

"There should be a small herd of our horses a mile or two south," she told him. "But most of them have never felt a rope."

"I'll get 'em. Stay here until I come back." He hesitated. "I can't give you the gun, Fay—seems like Wally took the only loaded one."

"And by this time he's probably at the ranch! Maybe Kingsley—"

"Don't think about that." He stopped her words and then his hands found her's in the darkness. "The kid always felt wrong about getting out of the country and leaving you alone. Figured he should have faced things. This is his way of trying to get square with himself. He'll be all right."

His lips touched her cheek and then he was gone. She heard him moving out of the canyon, into the open! She was alone. Standing close to the rock wall, she stared through the darkness and whispered; "Be sure to come back, Dan."

TWO hours later, Fay and Leighton were pounding toward the High-knoll range on saddleless, balky mounts. At the edge of the range, which overlooked the Double Spur home ranch, Leighton stopped.

"This is as far as we can ride."

Without speaking the girl dropped to the ground. Then he stepped down and the two ponies bolted across the range, racing for freedom.

"If they're got Wally, what'll we do? The whole outfit is probably back by now."

"Look," Dan gestured. "There's a light in the house."

Across the short stretch of range, Fay could see the glimmer of light. It was coming from the living room of the ranch house, which meant that her uncle was still awake—and which also might mean Wally had found him.

She caught Dan's hand.

"There's nothing to do, except—go ahead. Let's try for the back door—there aren't any lights in the bunkshed and maybe we can get in without being seen."

They hurried over the range to the yard, but there they began to move with careful slowness, carefully placing each step to avoid noise. There was not a sound from any part of the spread. Near the front door, a saddled pony waited, but it was not the dun.

Fay led the way to the back door and they went silently into the kitchen. With even slower steps, they crossed to the hall, where they could see the light from the living room. Dan gestured for her to wait, but as he started forward a voice broke the silence.

"I'm getting out of this dirty deal—I wish I'd let the bank smash, instead of taking your money, Herrick. Prison would've been easier than watching what you were doing. Seeing that boy driven from his home—"

It was Michael Dalton's voice!

"Shut up. You got what you wanted. I'm getting what I want, and we won't have to worry much longer. Wally was fool enough to come back here

and Fay's hiding out with Dan Leighton. They'll show up sooner or later and then we'll be rid of both Leighton and the boy—they'll hang. The girl won't be hard to handle.

"No, maybe she won't—but neither will you."

Dalton's voice lifted into a sudden shout—and a gun barked.

Leighton sprang down the hall and then stopped, whirling as someone stepped out of the shadows.

"Me, Dan," Wally whispered. "I was waiting to hear the rest of it. I left my pony and sneaked in here just as Dalton arrived—"

They went on to the living room and Fay ran after them. But at the door she halted. Her uncle was stretched on the floor, his arms askew, his body already settling into the lines of death.

Facing them, gun in hand, was Michael Dalton.

"I don't care who knows I did it," he shouted. "He had it coming—if it hadn't been for Fred Herrick—"

His words turned into an incoherent babble and above it Fay heard the sound of running men. The outfit—and Kingsley—were racing for the house.

"Dan!" Fay called. "Let's try for the back door!"

But he had not heard her, for he had caught the gun out of Wally's hands and snapped. "Get back, Kid—keep Fay out of the way.

The girl saw that Dalton, still babbling wildly, held a gun in his loose fingers. She sprang toward him, grasped the weapon and whirled as feet pounded across the hall.

She saw Kingsley's big face bobbing toward her. He was rushing like a maddened animal and the Colt in his hand was sweeping up.

"Fay!" Dan snapped. "Get back against the wall."

"Never mind," Kingsley bellowed. "I'll—"

He stopped, his words cutting off at the sight of Herrick's body lying grotesquely in a heap.

"Yes," Dalton yelled, "I killed him—and I've told them why—I'll tell what you were doing for Fred Herrick, too—how you fixed that hold-up at the bank when you knew Wally'd be there—"

Kingsley straightened and twisted, the gun in his hand flashed. It coughed and the banker's voice stopped.

"If this is a clean up, we'll make it a good one," the foreman roared, and he pointed his Colt at Dan Leighton. "I've been waiting for this for years—now, I'll get rid of double crossing Black Dan."

Fay stared at the gleaming muzzle of his gun and her fingers tightened on her own weapon. Leighton was flashing forward, his Colt lifting. Kingsley had called him "double crossing Black Dan." Could that possibly mean—

There was a hoarse explosion. The room filled with the smell of burning gun-powder and Kingsley seemed to become grotesquely tall. Then he crumpled to the floor.

Leighton whirled, his weapon covering the riders rushing from the hall.

"Come and get it," he gritted. "Your boss just got his—after committing another murder. He won't hang, but the rest of you will—if you live."

The waddies guns moved up—and then lowered again as they took in the scene over which death was presiding so terribly.

Leighton's gun swung in an arc.

"Get out if you don't want some of the same—and don't stop. Fork your ponies and keep on going."

He waited, his tall body half crouched, his eyes smokey and his face the color of gray rock.

The men in the hall began to shift, staring past Dan's gun at the bodies on the floor. Then, with one accord, they ran for the door and a second later were stamping down the steps.

DAN dropped the Colt into its holster and looked at Fay with a faint grin. "Sort of a clean up," he murmured. "And I'd better start for the sheriff."

But Wally spoke suddenly, his voice strange.

"Dan—Kingsley said—" he halted and then rushed on. "I heard about Black Dan's gang, in Durango."

"Yeah."

But Leighton was looking at Fay as he related his story.

"Kingsley moved into the Durango country a few years ago with a pack of gunmen and started trying to rustle all the cattle off the range. Nobody could hook him up with the rustling, but I figured he was the only one who could be doing it, so I went to him with a proposition for a partnership. He took me up and I found out everything I needed to know—after he'd made sure the country heard of 'Black Dan's gang.' My outfit wiped them out as they were making a cattle raid—all except Tim. He ran and—I didn't want to shoot him in the back. I've always regretted that."

When Fay remained silent, he moved to her side. "This has been pretty bad for you. Try to rest, now—I'll look after things."

"Wally's safe," she said, her voice very low and tired. "That means everything—"

"That means the Double Spur belongs to him because my home has to be yours, Fay."

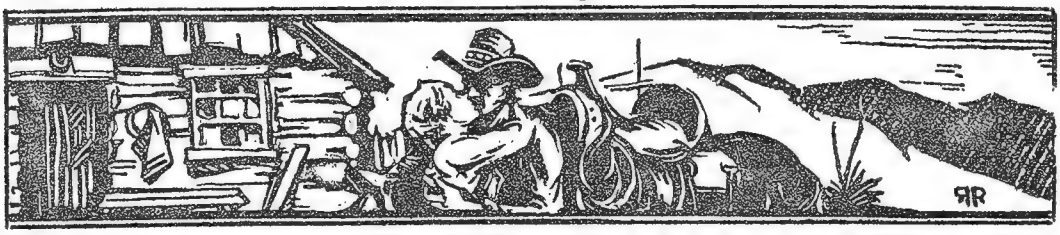
"Wait a minute," Wally broke in. "You're not both leaving—now! I wasn't trying to get the Double Spur for myself. When they framed up that bank robbery Uncle Fred had told me a wild story about my father's will leaving the whole ranch to me and nothing to Fay. Then I talked with Dalton because I knew my uncle was lying. They put on the fake holdup. Now—"

"Fay's marrying me," Dan said. "We'll invite you down to see us once in a while."

His face sobered as he looked at the girl.

"You haven't answered yet. Maybe you're still wondering about what Kingsley said."

"Yes—" She smiled at him. "I was thinking that even if it had been true, it couldn't make any difference. Nothing could."



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LOVE IS LOCO

By CLAY KAAR

Kathy struck at him with her clubbed gun.

Love is loco, and it can't be tampered with, though an old ranny's romantic scheme seemed fool-proof

MAYBE you think that busting broncs is the hardest job there is. Or maybe you think that rounding up wild steers is tough. But them two chores is nothing at all compared to riding herd on a love affair. Yeah, I speak from experience because it was me who planned that beautiful romance on the Rocking R.

Kathryn Robey was a girl, the daughter of Mike Robey who is my pardner here on the Rocking R. She was practically my daughter too, because it was me and Mike who raised her from the time her mother died, when she was only crawling size.

Yeah, raising a young female girl was a hell of a task for a couple old rannies like me and Mike. But we did the best we could. We taught her to ride and rope with the best of them, and later we sent her away to school.

When she got back from school she was growed up all of a sudden and as pretty as a picture. Tall and slim and strong she was, but nevertheless very feminine and appealing. Her hair was flaming gold, and her eyes was clear

and blue and flashing with that spirit of freedom and pride which you see in all range bred creatures.

Now, of course, we was mighty proud of her being so pretty, but her being growed up—well, that was something else, because a growed up girl is mighty hard to handle. In fact, we couldn't manage her at all, and it got so that Mike and me spent most of our time setting out under the big cottonwood tree worrying about her.

We was setting there worrying one afternoon when she came loping in from her usual afternoon ride. She gave us a wave, then went on around the house to the corrals.

"Mike," I said, "did you notice which way Kathy come ridin' in from?"

"Yeah, I noticed," he answered. "She's been ridin' in the Bonebreak Country again."

"Didn't you tell her not to?" I demanded. "Didn't you tell her that Red Munro and his outlaws was in this country again—an' probably usin' the Bonebreak for a hideout?"

"Yeah, I told her," he admitted, looking sheepish.

"Then why don't you make her stay away from there?" I snarled to show what I thought of weaklings like him. "Personally, I'd turn her over my knee an' give her a good tannin'. Maybe I would use a quirt on her an'—"

"Do you, by any chance, happen to be talking about me?"

YEAH, it was Kathy who had come up quiet. She spoke in a very sweet tone, but it didn't fool me any. When I turned around she was glaring at me very ferocious and hostile.

"Talkin' about you!" I scoffed with a little laugh. "Why no, Kathy. I was only tellin' Mike what I would do with that roan filly which—"

"You are lying, Hawkeye!" she pronounced.

"Now, Kathy," wheedled Mike. "It's not ladylike to—"

"And you too!" she snapped at her dad. "You and Hawkeye are like two old hens, always clucking at me. You think I'm still a little girl."

"Oh no!" I said right quick. "We don't think that."

"Then don't treat me like an infant!" she complained. "I can take care of myself."

"Sure. Sure." I said with plenty of tact. "You just got the wrong idea is all."

But my calm words didn't do much good. She give us another ferocious glare apiece, then wheeled for the house.

"There! You see?" I said to Mike. "You always back down when she gets mad. You can't handle her atall."

"Maybe you can do better," he snorted.

"You bet I can," I came back, "because I ain't afraid of her like you. Also, I ain't so dumb."

"Then *you* give her a lickin'," he suggests.

"Oh, I wouldn't break her spirit," I hastened to say. "No, I would first figger out what makes her so ornery. An' then I would—say, I got it!"

"What you got now? Asthma?"

"I got the reason she rides in the Bonebreak Country! She wants excitement!" I declared. "So we got to give her excitement which ain't so dangerous. Now, what would you say was the most excitin' thing to a person?"

After some heavy thought Mike says, "A new pair of boots!"

"Bah!" I snorted. "The most excitin' thing to a girl who's eighteen years old is—romance!"

"Romance!" he exclaims. "You mean to marry her off?"

"Exactly."

"Gosh, that does sound like sense," Mike agreed. "I always did sort of hope that Kathy and Ross McClain would—"

"I don't mean Ross," I corrected.

"What's the matter with him?" he

flared. "He's a fine young buck an' the best foreman we ever had."

"Sure, an' I like him too," I said. "But he—sh-h-h, here comes Kathy."

She had a smile on her face this time, so I knew she had got over her mad and also had recuperated from the terrific bawling out I had give her a few minutes previous.

"What were you two old grannies whispering?" she asked.

"Why—why, I just remarked that it's a warm day," I replied. "I—I—"

But I was spared thinking up more conversation, because our foreman, Ross McClain, come riding up just then.

HE WAS one of them tall, rangy gents who moves slow and easy but thinks fast. Sort of handsome in a way, with sandy hair and keen eyes that looked right into your brain. That is the way he was looking at Kathryn as he dismounted.

"Kathy," he drawled, "did you see any strange riders in the Bonebreak Country today?"

"Ross McClain, you mind your own business!" exploded Kathy in that quick way she has of exploding. "I can ride over there if I want to."

"Huh? Why sure!" says Ross like he was surprised. "Gosh, I was just askin' if—"

"You're as bad as Dad and Hawkeye!" she accused. "You're trying to scare me—and there's really no danger at all."

"Danger?" he says, still innocent. "Of course not!" Them outlaws wouldn't bother you. Why, you're just a little girl!"

Now, he should have knowed better than to insult her like that. His remark made her so dang mad she couldn't even talk. She could only glare and pat the dirt with her boot.

However, her tantrum didn't affect Ross any. He even gave forth a amused sort of chuckle as he swung to the saddle and made for the corral.

Before Kathy's mad could give her a serious case of apoplexy, Mike spoke up, "You shouldn't get so exasperated with Ross, Kathy. He's a all right gent. The kind that makes a good husband!"

"I hate him!" she cried. Then louder, "I hate him!"

Again she stormed for the house.

"Gosh!" said Mike, who is always mystified by things. "I would have swore that Kathy an' Ross was good friends. An' I always hoped that—"

"That is just what I was goin' to explain," I cut in patiently. "Kathy has knowed Ross too long an' too well to fall in love with him. We got to get her somebody new. Somebody who is romantic lookin' with curly black hair an' a mustache,"

"You mean a gent like that Leo Duval, who took over the Diamond A just recent?" he inquired.

"That's the man I have chose," I pronounced.

"But hell, Hawkeye, we don't know nothin' about him!" argued Mike. "Besides, I don't like his looks."

"You ain't marryin' him," I pointed out. "The point is that he is the romanticest lookin' gent in the country. We got to have a fancy hombre or else Kathy won't get excited."

"Well, okay then," Mike finally agreed. "But I don't see—"

"You don't have to see. I'll do the seein', an' I'll do it good too! You forget that I am called Hawkeye because I see things so good," I reminded him with dignity. "You just leave it to me, an' I will produce a romance on the Rockin' R with all hands livin' happy ever after."

SO SAYING, I got right up and went to the house to see Kathy. In my clever way, I suggested that it would be friendly to have our new neighbor, who she hadn't saw yet, down to supper some time. She agreed readily enough, but without no interest. That is, not right then. But

she got interested right dang quick when Leo Duval come riding in a couple days later. He was dressed special for the occasion, with a silk shirt and a white sombrero. When he took off his hat, his black curly hair and his moustache glistened very bright from beef tallow.

All added up, he was extremely handsome, so it is no wonder that Kathy got suddenly fluttery. As I made the introduction, she ducked her head sort of shy, then looked up at him through the corners of her eyes. I could see right off that it was love at first sight.

Leo also acted stricken. His dark eyes flashed passionate, and he held her hand a long time after shaking it. Maybe he would have held it even longer if Ross hadn't butted in with some remark about getting to supper. That is the way with Ross; he would rather look at victuals than at a romance which is starting right under his nose.

BUT right after supper, I managed to get Kathy and Leo left alone under the cottonwood where they could get acquainted. And I guess they did a right good job of it, because Leo come riding down again the next night. And the next. And the next.

Gosh, my clever plan was working even faster than I figured. Kathy had sure enough fell in love, and went around plumb dreamy-eyed all the time. But she still was bull-headed and still rode in the Bonebreak Country, which made me very anxious for this romance to come to a climax. And I got even anxiouser when Ross brought in some bad news one day.

"I cut the trail of ten ridden horses in the Bonebreak," he reported. "I guess that rumor about Red Munro was true."

"Looks like it," I agreed. "I guess we better start night-herdin' the beef."

"Yeah," he said. Then sarcastic, "An' I guess we better ride herd on Kathy. You an' Mike can't keep her home."

"Say, you just watch after the beef!" I bawled him out. "I'll take care of Kathy with a very clever scheme I have in mind."

I wasn't bragging either. I had a plan which I started going that very night. After supper I got Kathy out under the cottonwood before Ross and Mike had finished their eating.

"Kathy, you're seein' a lot of Leo Duval lately," I commenced. "Too dang much!"

"Why do you say that?" she demanded, getting hostile.

"Because we don't know nothin' about him," I told her. "He might be a—a horse thief for all we know."

At that, Kathy acted just like I figured she would. She arched her neck and snapped indignant, "I won't have you talking about Leo that way."

I almost smiled at the quick way she sided with him. But because I'd heard somebody come out of the house, I hurried to exclaim, "Don't tell me that you're in love with that gent!"

"Why, Hawkeye, I—I—" She was on the point of denying it, but something suddenly changed her mind. She threw back her head and stared into space as she said in a dreamy voice, "Well, I can't help but be swept off my feet by Leo. He is such a gentleman . . . so romantic . . . such manners . . . such curly hair . . ."

"He's too slick to suit me!" I put in, still acting my part very smooth. "He ain't half the man that Ross McClain is."

"Oh, Ross!" she exclaimed very sour. "He is utterly selfish and conceited. He doesn't know how to be polite and—and friendly to a girl. I hate him!"

Then, to get back to the point, I demanded angrily, "Say, you ain't goin' to marry that Leo, are you?"

Immediately she got dreamy eyed

again and answered in a coy voice, "Why—why, he hasn't asked me yet. But I'm sure he will when the right moment comes along. The romantic moment!"

Now, that is just what I wanted to know. But of course I didn't let on because she, being bull-headed and ornery, would have changed her mind right quick and married somebody else.

"Hmph!" I snorted, just to cinch things. "I won't allow it."

With that, I got up and ambled to the house to talk to Ross. Only he wasn't there. And he wasn't in the bunkhouse. I finally found him at the corrals saddling up a horse.

"Where you think you're goin'?" I inquired.

"I'm leavin'," he replied gruffly.

"Leave the Rockin' R!" I gasped. "You can't do that. Gosh, you been with us ever since you was a range kid."

"Then it's time I was leavin'," he insisted.

"No you don't," I said firmly. "Not till you help me with Kathy."

He left off pulling up a latigo to ask, "What about Kathy?"

"I want you to kidnap her an' hold her for ransom," I stated.

"Huh?" he said, his eyes bugging out.

"You'll be disguised, posin' as one of Red Munro's outlaws," I explained. "I'll have Mike or somebody come to her rescue, an' you'll escape without her knowin' who you really are. But of course she'll be so scared that she'll stay plumb away from the Bonebreak Country."

"You've gone plumb loco!" Ross hollered.

"Maybe, an' maybe not," I answered, and I used the next half hour and all my best cuss words to argue.

WELL, he finally agreed to do like I asked, and we figured out all the little details. That is, all but one. I didn't mention to him that my brilliant scheme called for Leo Duval and not Mike to do the rescuing. That, you see, was to be the big romantic moment that Kathy had mentioned.

Clever? You bet it was. And that is just what Leo Duval said when I rode up and explained the scheme to him next day. In fact, he said that nobody but a genuine genius could have thought up such a romantic plan. Of course, that was putting it pretty strong, but I was glad that somebody could recognize genius when they saw it.

That was more than Mike could recognize. Yeah, I let him in on the scheme, but I wished I hadn't. He got downright abusive, saying I was crazy in the head if not downright loco. But of course he was only jealous of my genius, and I went right ahead with my plan.

I was *very* pleased with myself.

Saturday was the day I had picked, and on that afternoon I got Kathy to go riding with me instead of by herself. We rode to the east range, nearby the Bonebreak, where I pretended to look at a spring. Then we started back on the trail I had instructed Ross to be.

As we come picking our way through a bunch of big boulders, a voice barked out, "Raise 'em high!"

Gosh, even though I was expecting it, I was startled because it didn't sound like Ross atall. And it didn't look like Ross who reined out from behind a boulder. He was riding a unbranded horse, and a handkerchief with eyeholes covered his face.

Not until he rode in close to take my gun was I sure it was Ross. Then I saw one eye give a wink behind the mask, and I suddenly remembered to act out my part.

"What is the big idea?" I barked at him.

"Red Munro wants your comp'ny," he answered in his disguised voice.

"That is, until he is paid ten thousand dollars."

I started to argue, but Kathy suddenly came to like and snapped, "My father won't pay you ten thousand dollars!"

"We'll see about that," answered Ross.

"It's outrageous!" Kathy fumed, and I could see that she was getting mad instead of scared like she ought. "I won't—"

"Shut up! An' ride!" Ross cut in.

"Where to?" I asked, as if I didn't know already.

"To the line shack up the canon," he ordered. "Get goin'."

"I won't stand for this!" Kathy wailed. "I—"

"Now, Kathy," I soothed, "you just relax an' let me handle this here situation."

But my words didn't calm her none. She was mad enough to start something, even though Ross was holding a gun on us all the time. So I was relieved when we reached the line shack and Ross ordered us inside.

"Now what?" I asked.

"The gal will write a ransom note to her ol' man," said Ross.

"I won't!" snapped Kathy, very defiant. Gosh, if her bull-headedness wasn't so provoking, I would have admired her spunk.

"But, Kathy, "I began, "you—"

"Drop that gun, hombre!" barked a voice from the door.

All three of us whirled around, Ross dropping his gun.

"Leo!" cried Kathy, for it was Leo who had spoke. He was standing there with his .45 on Ross, just like I had instructed.

"I was ridin' on the ridge an' happened to see yore procession," he explained, flashing his eyes like a hero at Kathy. "I figgered you might need some help. What's up?"

"This—this brute was going to hold us for ransom," Kathy told him, pointing at Ross.

"Oh he was, was he?" thundered Leo, changing his dreamy smile of romance to a scowl. Then he suddenly stepped over and did something which wasn't called for in my plans atall. He jerked the bandanna mask from Ross's face.

"Ross!" shrieked Kathy, very surprised and pained to see who our kidnaper was.

"One of yore own men!" added Leo with a sneer. "He ought to be lynched for this! An' I'll have my men do that little thing right away quick."

"Say, now, Leo," I chipped in. "This ain't accordin' to—"

But I didn't get no farther on account of Kathy. Recovering from the first shock, she suddenly snatched up the gun Ross had dropped and stuck it in Leo's back, ordering, "Now, you drop *your* gun, Leo!"

"Hey!" I hollered in protest, but Kathy paid no attention. She was right in the midst of an ornery spell; her face was stern and her voice harsh as she commanded, "Now, Ross, make your getaway! Ride—before they try to—to lynch you."

"Wait, Kathy!" said Ross. "This is all just—"

"Oh, hurry, Ross!" she cut in, her voice suddenly getting shrill for some reason. "Ride! I don't care if you did turn outlaw. I don't want you lynched, because I—I love you!"

WELL, now, for just a second I thought she meant that, because she fairly screamed it. And Ross thought so too, I guess, for his face opened up in a grin like a cut watermelon.

But I quickly realized that Kathy was only out of her head from the excitement, and that she really loved Leo, not Ross. So I spoke up, "Kathy, just a minute an' I'LL expla—"

But again I got interrupted from the doorway. And again a gruff voice barked, "Drop that gun!"

It was Leo's turn to drop, and he

did. In the doorway two ugly strangers had appeared with their hands full of guns covering the four of us.

"Say, this is gettin' monotonous!" I gasped, because this was something else which wasn't in my plans atall. "What you gents want?"

"We want the girl—until tomorra afternoon, when you'll send a rider into the Bonebreak with ten thousand in cash," replied the ugliest of the two outlaws. "Red Munro will be waitin' in the trail!"

Red Munro! Now, what . . . and how . . . But I didn't have time to get things figured out, for the ugly outlaw was saying, "You just come along peaceable, miss." Then to his pardner, "Slim, you hold these gents while I git the girl on my horse."

He led Kathy outside, and we could hear the sounds of a horse being double mounted. Then came another surprise. We heard the sharp crack of a rifle, followed by a crash.

"What's that?" demanded Leo.

"Some gent in the brush plugged Tex's horse," informed Slim, looking outside. "The girl fell free, but Tex is pinned under."

"You blunderin' fools!" rasped Leo.

"Aw, hell!" said Slim. "It ain't our fault, Red."

"Red?" I exclaimed, getting a sneaking suspicion that things were maybe getting out of hand. "Say, what the hell is all this about?"

For answer, Leo recovered his gun and stepped over beside Slim. There was an ugly scowl on his face as he snarled back at me, "You chuckleheaded ol' fool! I'm Red Munro!"

"You're Leo Duval!" I corrected. "You own the Diamond A an' have got black hair."

"Sure!" he said with a nasty laugh. "I figured that I could do my outlawin' better by posin' as a respectable rancher. But Slim has done ruined that scheme."

"Then you know Slim?" I inquired, very puzzled.

"Hell, yes!" he snorted. "Slim an' Tex are my men, you ol' fool. Your inventin' this fake ransom business gave me a idea. I told Tex an' Slim to be here an' take the girl without recognizing me. That would get me some ransom, an' still not tip off the fact that I ain't Leo Duval."

"Gosh!" I exclaimed, feeling very uncomfortable to have a tough outlaw like Red Munro holding a gun on me.

BEFORE I could think of something more to say, my eye strayed past Leo and Slim—to see Kathy tiptoeing in the door. She was mussed up some from her fall, but her eyes was cool and in her hand was a gun which she evidently had picked off'n Tex.

"Kathy!" I blurted out, to warn her.

Immediately, Leo whirled around, levelling his gun at her. But at the same time Ross went into action. He charged at Leo, whose gun went off in the floor. Then they both went down in a tangle.

It became a free-for-all fight.

Slim also had whirled, just as Kathy struck at him with her clubbed gun. But it was only a glancing blow, so I leaped for Slim. I jumped on his back and rode him like a bronc—until he gave a backward heave which crashed us both to the floor, with me on the bottom.

As my head smacked the floor I liked to passed out. But I heard a dull thud and felt the outlaw relax as Kathy rapped him to sleep with her gun butt.

Then right quick she stepped over to where Ross and Leo was fighting, and I heard another dull thud as she took care of Leo. Gosh, that girl sure handled things efficient!

About that time, into the shack came charging a gent with a rifle in his hand. And I'll be danged if it wasn't Mike Robey. One glance around showed him that things was

under control, so he stood scowling down at me.

"You locoed son-of-a-sheep-stealin'-Siwash!" he barked very ungentle at me. "It's a dang good thing I hid out there in the brush to check on yore hare-brain scheme!"

"It was a perfectly good scheme," I defended, "if only it had worked out better."

"Yah!" bawled Mike in uncomplimentary tones. "You planned a romance, but what you produced was dang near a massacree."

"Now, Mike," I argued diplomatic. "My plans was perfect, an'—hey, look there."

I pointed across the shack at Ross and Kathy. They was both on their feet while Leo—or Red Munro—was laying unconscious on the floor. The fighting was all over of course, but them two didn't seem to know it. Kathy was standing there stiff and rigid, her eyes flashing with onreyness as she stared very angry at Ross.

"You said I was just a little girl!" Kathy was saying in a raspy voice.

"An' you said you hated me!" snapped back Ross. "I heard you! Under the cottonwood the other night."

"You always were as blind as a bat!" accused Kathy, though I didn't know they had been talking about bats.

"An' you always got a chip on your shoulder!" hollered Ross.

FOR a long minute they stood there squared off from each other like two bulls in a butting match. Then suddenly Ross sort of relaxed and give out a deep sigh. A grin spread on his face, the silly kind.

"But a few minutes ago, Kathy," he uttered in a suddenly gentle but mushy voice, "you said you—you loved me."

"I didn't! I was just—just excited. I—I—" she stammered until all the mad was wore out of her voice. Then sort of feeblelike she suggested, "Well, somebody had to say it, didn't they?"

"Gosh, Kathy! Gosh!" gasped Ross, like he was a trifle short of breath. "I—I been waitin' years an' years to say it!"

"Then," said Kathy, who wasn't going to let him have the last word, "then I guess you needn't wait any longer."

And that is when Ross suddenly got his breath and his sense back. Reaching out his arms, he grabbed her to him and kissed her in a very eager manner. And for once, Kathy seemed to be agreeing with him.

Well now, that was a very surprising situation. But also it was a very touching sight and also romantic. Yeah, that was it! Romantic! And all on account of my clever planning.

"There! You see?" I said, turning to Mike with an air of dignity. "I told you I would produce a romance."

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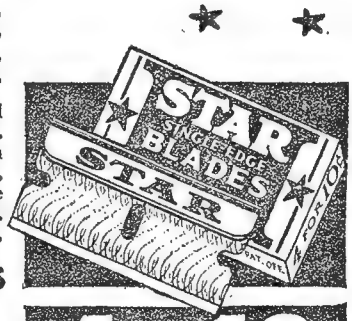

FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

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The He-Man's World

By S. Omar Barker

A GAL ain't good for nothin' when you're ridin' up the trail,
A-wearin' out the daylight lookin' at a longhorn's tail;
An' all you got to do at night besides your turn at guard
Is ketch a wink of sleep or two an' damn a bed that's hard.

It's then you plumb forgit the gals an' all their winnin' ways.
It's cows an' men an' hosses—an' it will be, all your days!
It's like them old time sailors on their sailin' ships at sea,
Who knowed the world was made for men, like worlds had ort to be.

THE button of the trailin' crew may speak about his Ma,
But like as not he'll git advised to button up his jaw,
For women at the wagon, like the duck that couldn't swim,
Is a subject you can do without from even such as him.

You lost a gal you cain't forgit? Jest take out up the trail—
It's the cure for such an ailment that was never knowed to fail.
It's set up in the saddle, boys, an' eat your bait of dust,
An' swaller beans an' biskits till your bellybands will bust!

JEST think the thoughts of ridin' men that's rough an' raw an' free,
An' plumb forgit there is a breed that's sometimes called "the she"!
A gal ain't good for nothin' when you're ridin' with a herd—
It's cows an' men an' hosses, you can take my blinkin' word!

An' if you don't believe it, boys, I tell you what you do:
Jest foller up the wagon with a trail herd an' its crew.
You'll let your whiskers grow a thatch a cyclone couldn't muss,
You'll chaw and spit acrost the fire an' rope an' ride an' cuss!

YOU'LL set up in the saddle in a he-man's world an' free—
But you'll miss the gals like hell, I guess—an' claim you don't—like me!

Steve looked steadily at her and said, "This is the second crime you've tried to saddle me with, Miss Crawford."

RUSTLER'S ROMANCE

A THRILLING RANGELAND MYSTERY ROMANCE

By WILLIAM FARGO

Sue Crawford turned range detective to solve the mystery of rustling and murder that hung over the Arrowhead country. But neither the badge pinned to her bosom nor the gun she carried in a hidden holster, nor the oath to which she had sworn, could keep her heart from turning irresistibly to the one man who constantly stood in her path!

CHAPTER I
Gunsmoke Homecoming

SUE CRAWFORD had loved her home, but when her mother died, her father had sent her East to school, and now—six years later—she was returning to the scenes of her childhood, scenes that flashed by as the stage rolled toward Arrowhead, the nearest town to her dad's old Circle J spread.

Tears clouded her eyes when she thought of the manner of her return and—and the death, or rather murder, of her father. But Sue was a daughter of the West—determined to trail down his killers. She had come back alone—and under a false name to hide her identity . . .

Suddenly the sharp sound of a shot pierced her musings. The stage came to an abrupt jolting halt, and as Sue turned a startled glance out the window, the express guard slid slowly into sight, his body hanging limp, and bounced off a wheel into the rutted sand of the road.

"Ambushed," cried "Gila" Humphries, the only other passenger, as he tried to reach the Colt swinging at his hip.

"Stick 'em up, hombre."

A masked face, large, portentous, protruded through the side window of the coach, two piercing eyes glaring at the occupants above a pair of heavy unwavering forty-fives.

For a second that ominous face confronted Sue and Gila. Then—"Everybody out," a rough voice called from the opposite side of the stage.

Sue jerked open the coach door and jumped to the ground. The driver was climbing down from his seat, his hands held high above his head. Two masked men covered him and Gila; another relieved them of their guns and searched their pockets. Three more outlaws were dragging out the money box. They paused a moment when they saw Sue.

"Yore shore packin' some pretty freight, Lingo," one of them said to the stage driver. "Wouldn't mind ridin' with her a ways myself, if I wasn't so busy."

Sue glanced down at the guard's body and then back at the outlaw who had spoken. Her lip curled.

"Well I'd have decided objections," she said contemptuously, her dark eyes flashing fire. "I don't care for murderers."

The man started, and his own lips —thinly covered by his black mask— twisted into a nasty snarl.

"My, my what a pert little heifer. Reckon I'll help myself to a kiss fer that."

He swaggered up to Sue and leaned toward her, his heavy body almost grotesque in the awkwardness of its movement. As he leaned toward her, the girl's left hand darted forward and snatched at the man's mask and for a brief second she saw his scowling red face. Then his quick thrust sent her staggering back against the side of the coach.

"Damn you, I've half a mind—" He raised his six-gun hesitatingly.

"Here, you mangy coyote," Lingo's voice clipped the silence angrily. "You touch her and I'll shore make this country small fer you, if it takes the rest of my days trailin' you."

The outlaw whirled with gun raised. Sue still crouched against the side of the stage. Her hand was in her bosom already gripping the stock of the short thirty-two hidden snugly away in a shoulder holster under her traveling dress. She didn't know whether she could shoot a man in the back or not, but she wasn't going to let this road agent kill the driver.

There was a brief second's pause broken by the sudden spat of a bullet striking, followed by the faint crash of a high-powered rifle from across the cañon. One of the outlaws spun dizzily around and lunged forward on his face, clutching at the air as his gun fell from his hand.

The man who had spoken to Sue still covered Lingo and Gila, but the others swung to search for their attacker. There came another shot; dust spurted at their feet. A thin spiral of blue smoke drifted down from a rock crevice high up on the opposite sky line. It was far out of range of the outlaw's hand weapons.

"Get going."

The command was scarcely unnecessary. Stunned at first by the unexpectedness of the attack, the men had stood silent. Now they dashed toward shelter.

LINGO and Gila lifted the dead man and put him in the stage.

Lingo lifted his hat apologetically. "I hope you don't mind ridin' with a dead man, mam?"

"Not at all," Sue answered bravely.

He looked at her admiringly for a moment and then said: "Mam, my sombrero's shore off to you. You shore stood up to that low-down coyotte like a top-hand. If we had a few men like you, we'd run them mavericks bow-legged. There's been too many holdups goin' on around here."

Lingo's eye drifted past Gila as he spoke.

"Looka here, Lingo," Gila growled. "They ain't no bull-whacker goin' to insinuate I'm short sand enough in my craw to put up a war-play. One of them ring-tailed sidewinders had a shootin' iron in my ribs before I knowed the ball had opened. Ain't that so, mam?"

"Yes indeed," Sue answered a trifle maliciously.

Lingo cast a scornful glance over Gila, then walked over to the dead outlaw, stooped to pull off his mask, then straightened with a surprised grunt.

"Well, if it ain't Lon Gray." He turned steady eyes on Gila. "How come one of yore Box A punchers is in on this deal, Gila?"

Gila, foreman of the Box A, stared down at the dead bandit. Things had been coming too fast for him. He shook his head.

Lingo's face darkened.

"It looks to me like the Box A has throwed in with the bandits. 'Bout time you was comin' back, I reckon.

was sure to do if they met—well, it wouldn't help Sue's plans out any. If she intended to find out anything about her father's murder, no one must know who she was. But there wasn't time to worry about that now.

"So you think it was the sheriff who fired on the bandits?" Sue smiled to herself as she spoke the words. She'd come to the conclusion that there was only one person who could have fired those shots from the hills. Of course it had been Flash. He was the sort of person you could count on to do such a thing. She had heard enough about him to be sure of his bravery and his alertness. But she kept her thoughts to herself. "Then we owe the sheriff a lot of thanks."

Gila nodded his head.

THAT night the little town of Arrowhead swarmed with people. Talk of the attempted holdup was rampant. Lingo told his story again and again, and the tale was soon common property. Not that holdups were anything new in these parts, but Sue's action in calling the turn on the outlaws had aroused intense admiration.

Gila kept discreetly silent. The man asked him questions, too—"How come you didn't get those fellows?" and "What's this we hear about Lon Gray," But when anyone questioned him, Gila answered as briefly as possible. Sue noticed this, and in the jam of people crowding the Malapi Hotel for news of the bandits, she managed to call Gila aside and bestow her sweetest smile upon him.

"Who was this cowboy that got killed?" she asked him finally, her eyes narrowed to study his face.

Gila shook his head.

"Dunno much about him, mam," he told her. "'Ceptin' he was as good a buckaroo as ever forked a twister. He come to me with a good recommend from Bart Henley, an' when Henley sends me a man I generally takes him. Bart's hard himself, and the fellers he sends to the Box A has always been A number one. Lon was a slick cowhand, all right, but I guess I undersized his play. Looks like someone was dealin' cards to me offen the bottom of the deck."

Sue searched Gila's face as he spoke. He seemed sincere enough, but she was determined to quiz him further.

"Who's the Bart person?"

"Bart? Oh, he's big medicine around these parts, sort of hasty with his guns, Bart is, but always on the right side. You can say that for him."

"What did you mean when you said he was a hard man?" Sue asked the question idly, but in reality she was tensed in every nerve for Gila's answer.

"Well, Bart ain't exactly a ladies' man. He's rough, but he's all right. He's Ace's foreman. You heard of him, ain't you?"

Sue nodded.

"Yes, I've heard of Ace," she said. "I expect to meet him while I'm here, and I want to meet this Bart Henley, too. Couldn't you manage it some way for me?"

"No trouble to meet Bart, mam. They's a dance in town tonight. Old Bud down at the Sure Shot Saloon thought he might as well make a clean up on the crowd, so he's havin' a dance. Bart'll be there all right. In fact, I'll 'low as how you can throw yore eye on every longhorn an' maverick that ranges within a hundred mile of here, down to the Elite Dance Hall tonight."

It took Sue but a second to decide that she would attend the dance.

"I'd like to go," she said. "If someone would take me. Perhaps you would. Would you?"

There wasn't any perhaps about it. The old cowman was surprised and flattered, tickled to death at the honor. Sue had not yet decided just what she thought about Gila Humphries. His story about the dead bandit

Likely the sheriff'll have some questions fer you when we hits Arrowhead."

Gila didn't answer, but the puzzled frown remained on his face as they returned to their places in the coach. The trip started again in strained silence. It seemed strange to Sue that the stranger who had driven off the bandits had not shown himself.

SUE sat in a corner and picked up the threads of her thoughts. She was coming home, but now the Circle J was no longer hers. It was in the hands of Ace Cassiter, her father's oldest friend, and she was returning as a representative of the Cattlemen's Association to audit Cassiter's Bar B ranch accounts and investigate his security because he was trying to float a large loan from the association. She had begged for the chance to be assigned to this job. Ever since her father's death she had wanted to come back, and this was her first opportunity.

"They's been a right smart of rustlin' goin' on around here," Gila's voice broke in on her thoughts.

"Really?" Sue asked the question vaguely, trying to pull her mind back from the thoughts which had been assailing her. "Do they run the cattle down across the Border or up north?"

Gila's worried face brightened at this intelligent question. It showed that the girl knew something about both cows and the country.

"Well, mam," he continued, "We ain't exactly located the jaspers. They's been two sheriffs an' some right smart of cowhands smoked up lately, tryin' to get them. I'd guess they was tied up with these road agents just shot us up."

Sue came to attention at once. The association's best detective was down in this country right now, investigating the rustling that had been going on. She had orders to get in touch with him as soon as possible, this Flash Williams whom she had never met. And they hadn't even told her where to find him. His reputation was too well-known and feared among bad men, so he'd been forced to travel secretly.

"Have you lost many cattle from your ranch?" Sue asked the Box A man.

"No mam. We never lost a cow. They's a passel of gun-totin' punchers ridin' the Box A range that'd be sure pizen fer any cow-rustlin' gents tryin' to maverick off us."

"You mean everybody else has lost cattle and you haven't?" Such a situation sounded funny to Sue, knowing cattle country as she did.

"That's just what I mean." There was a note of pride in Gila's voice when he answered. It was evident that he saw nothing unusual in this situation except the proving that his men were better than other punchers in the surrounding country.

"Well, whom do you think fired on those bandits?" Sue asked.

"Slim, I s'pose."

"Slim? Who's that?"

"Slim Jackson. He's our boy sheriff. Nice kid, but too young for the job."

"Jackson? Tell me something about him." The name had struck a responsive chord in Sue's memory. Somewhere she knew she had heard that name before.

"Well," Gila began hesitatingly. "Can't tell you much about him. He's a kid lived here in these parts all his life. His dad used to have a ranch down Coyote Springs way, but him and his sis, they live in Arrowhead now. Got a mighty purty sister. One of my Box A punchers is sorta shinin' up to her now."

That would be Maude Jackson, of course. Maude had gone to school with Sue for one year in the East. No wonder the name had sounded familiar. But it was a shock to learn that she was living in Arrowhead now. If Maude recognized Sue, as she

sounded logical enough. And in the meantime, until she did decide just where Gila stood in the circle of Arrowhead characters, Sue wanted him to be her friend.

CHAPTER II
Reunion

THE Elite Dance Hall was just an annex to Bud Turner's saloon, the Sure Shot. To the left as one entered was a bar for the thirsty. To the right were roueltte wheels, faro cases, chuck-a-luck and card tables. These were closed for the evening. Bud's professional gamblers and commission girls had been given a night off, and he had turned his place over to the more sedate citizens of Arrowhead.

Sue's first impression of the dance was that there were ten men present to every woman. Ten or twelve groups were engaged in round and square dancing, and along the wall thirty or forty stags enviously watched those men lucky enough to have partners to dance with.

Sue stood in the door to watch for a moment while Gila's eyes traveled over the dancers.

"It don't seem like Bart's come yet," he told her finally. "But most everybody else has. See that feller over in the corner with the two guns? That's Slim Jackson, our boy sheriff. He'll want to see you about the stick up."

The man indicated was a tall stern youngster, his youthful face bent into serious lines of worry. He was plainly dressed, somberly almost, in a dull gray outfit, without coat or chaps. As he stood aloof from the others, gazing over the crowd, Sue noticed that of all the men there, he was the only one armed. The others had all deposited their weapons on a table at the end of the bar. But Slim wore two guns, big black-handled weapons, tied low down on his legs.

Even as Sue watched him, the man caught her eye. He crossed the floor toward her at once.

"Mam," he said politely, "I'm the sheriff, Slim Jackson, an' I reckon you're the lady that was on the stage this afternoon. If you can give me a little time I'd like to talk with you about the holdup. I understand you got a look at one of the outlaws. Think you'd know him again if you saw him?"

Sue found herself liking this Slim Jackson, even as she had liked Maude, his sister, when they were at school together. At Slim's question she smiled confidently, and her answer was quick and decisive.

"Yes, indeed. I'd know that outlaw again the minute I saw him."

As she spoke, Sue thought she heard a low exclamation in the doorway behind her. She turned quickly, but no one was there. Slim seemed not to have noticed anything. In fact, he was too busy looking at her with open admiration to have noticed anything short of a pisol shot.

"Mr. Humphries," she said, turning to Gila. "Did you see anybody in the door?"

"No-m. I didn't see no one, Miss Martin."

Sue had not yet become accustomed to her assumed name, and she could hardly keep back a startled motion at the words. It was going to be easier for her, though, if people didn't know her true identity. But her careful plans for concealment were suddenly shattered.

A girl of about her own age, plump and jolly, broke from her partner as they passed the group at the door and rushed up to Sue. It was Maude Jackson, Slim's sister.

"Why, Sue Crawford, whatever are you doing here?

Sue tried to hide her chagrin, because she was genuine glad to see her old schoolmate. But she welcomed the excuse to get away from Gila and Slim; after being so suddenly exposed

to them as an imposter. Slim stood with a surprised and sudden frown, while Gila glared after the retreating girls open-mouthed.

"Well, I'll be hornswoggled," the Box A foreman ejaculated finally. "It's got so you can't believe nothin' no more. Sue Crawford, huh? What you suppose John Crawford's kid is doin' here, an' what did she lie about her name for? That's what I want to know."

Slim shook his head, and the worried lines in his face deepened noticeably.

"Search me. But I know one thing. Her bein' here isn't goin' to make my job any easier for me. If John Crawford died the way I think he did, his daughter ain't any too safe. I suppose I got to ride herd on her to see that nothin' happens."

"Yeah? Ride herd on *her?*" Gila raised his bushy eyebrows inquiringly.

Meanwhile Maude Jackson was pulling Sue eagerly across the crowded room.

"Come over here, Sue, away from the men folks. I want to hear all about you, and where you've been. Haven't heard a thing about you since you left school. What brought you back out here, and why didn't you let me know you were coming?"

Sue had already decided against taking her friend into her confidence. She couldn't tell the entire story without bringing Flash into it, and his presence wasn't her secret. Sue was wishing mightily that she knew where the elusive Flash was right now. It certainly was tantalizing not to know; he might be in that very room without her knowing it.

Suddenly she interrupted Maude's steady stream of chatter. "Who's that man over there looking at us so hard, Maude?" she asked, indicating a young puncher who stood some feet away, openly glowering at the two girls.

"That?" Maude laughed and blushed a bit self-consciously as she spoke. "That's just Blondie Carter."

Maude turned up an impudent nose at the puncher, gave her curly head a saucy little fling, and laughed again. He turned abruptly away, his ears burning.

Sue looked at her friend inquiringly. "You certainly treat 'em rough, Maude. Do they all stand for it that way?"

The merriment died out of Maude's eyes, and a slight quiver ran over her lips as she watched the man go up to the bar for a drink.

"I like Blondie, really, Sue. I think I like him better than anybody else. But he's too bossy. He's only been here about three months, and already he has a fit if I go out with any one else. And he's *muy hostile* because I was out riding all afternoon with another man and even let him bring me to the dance to-night."

"Maude, you're a flirt." The twinkle in Sue's eyes belied the severity of her voice. "Who's this other man that's taking so much of your time?"

"Oh, just a drifter. He hasn't been here long, either, but he's a square shooter. Fellow named Steve Bennett."

"Was you callin' me, mam?"

THE girls turned quickly at the words. Sue found herself looking into a pair of bright blue eyes. The man was in his early twenties, a tall rangy person, good to look at, but a little too sure of himself, Sue decided. Her quick eye detected two shiny spots on his plain leather chaps, midway between knee and thigh. Those spots could have been made only by heavy pistol holsters rubbing day after day against the leather.

"So you're a two-gun man, Steve Bennett," Sue said to herself. "I wonder—are you good or bad?"

She continued a swift inventory of the man. His clothes gave no clue to his character. They lacked both the

color and the trimmings of the dandy, and the wear and tear of the hard worker. She looked at his hands. They were heavily tanned, but bore no signs of toil. He couldn't, then, be a gambler; a gambler's hands were always white and soft. There was only one conclusion to make. A drifter, a man who lived out of doors, wore two guns and went without gloves, was a gunman, a killer. Instinctively Sue moved a step away from him.

Steve seemed not to have noticed, but smiled at Maude.

"You mentioned my name, Miss Maude, he drawled. "Was you aimin' to honor me with the next dance?"

Maude smiled back and shook her head.

"No, Steve. Sorry, but I promised this one. But I'd like to make you acquainted with Miss Crawford. Maybe she'll dance with you."

Steve bowed gravely to Sue.

"I'd sure appreciate the favor, Miss Crawford."

Before Sue had time to answer, she felt a hand on her arm and turned to face Lingo, the stage driver. There was a tiny frown of worry between his eyes, and his voice when he spoke was low enough to be for her ears only.

"Does I understand correctly, mam, that yo're John Crawford's daughter?"

Sue nodded.

"Then they's somethin' I got to tell you, *muy pronto*. You meet me at the door right after this dance. It's somethin' you need to know."

Sue nodded again in surprised agreement. Lingo released his hold on her arm and turned to lead Maude out onto the dance floor. But their path was barred by Blondie Carter, who had just come up from the bar.

"This is my dance, I reckon," he said, and there was a belligerent tone in his rough young voice.

"Sorry," Maude answered him pertly. "But this is Lingo's."

For a moment they glared at each other, two angry children, in love.

"Reckon I'll take it just the same," Blondie said, a trifle thickly. He had had one drink too many. "Lingo here ain't dancin', are you, Lingo?"

Lingo looked uncertainly from Blondie to Maude. Blondie intimidated him not in the least, but he liked Maude and wanted to do what would please her. She saw his quandary and answered for him.

"Oh yes, Lingo's dancing," she said, draping her arm on his shoulder, ready to glide away. "And I'm having this one with him. Come on," and they danced away.

Blondie took an impetuous step after them, his boyish jaw clamped down hard, his eyes burning with rage. Steve stepped forward to lay a quick hand on his arm.

"Don't you do it, Blondie," he said soothingly.

Blondie shrugged himself loose. He looked angrily at Steve for a second, glanced back at Maude and Lingo, now almost lost in the crowd of dancers, and then stalked out of the dance hall.

"Whew," Steve pretended to mop his brow. "Looked like we was about to be drug into a lover's quarrel." Then, as Sue did not answer, "Won't you dance with me, Miss Crawford?"

THEY had not taken three steps before Sue realized that she had a partner who could really dance. He led her into a slow easy rhythm that brought comfort to her jangled nerves and made her forget for a moment the day's crowded events. Steve was the first to break the silence.

"Mam," he said, and Sue could hear laughter in his deep voice, "I saw in your eyes you didn't like me the first time you saw me. What's wrong?"

Sue was startled by this unexpected attack. She leaned back against his arm to look up into his face. The face was grave, but there was an ironic

twinkle in the blue depths of his eyes. It nettled her, and she decided to return as good as he sent.

"Men who have well-kept hands like yours and wear two guns are dangerous, Mr. Bennett," she retorted. "And I don't like dangerous men unless I know which side of the law they are on."

If she had expected to embarrass Steve, Sue was doomed to disappointment. He merely leaned back his head and laughed, his eyes twinkling down into hers.

"Well, mam, I'm bound to agree that folks who pack hardware are sure dangerous," and he regarded her quizzically.

With a slight shock Sue realized what he meant. When a man dances with a girl, his right arm slides under her left one, and under Sue's left arm pit was her own concealed weapon. Steve had detected its presence and was now laughing at her over it.

Sue was embarrassed, but she managed to smile back up into the face above her and her voice was steady when she answered.

"Dangerous, you say?"

"Dangerous, I said, mam." The man's eyes were almost serious now. "You got me through the heart first thing."

CHAPTER III
Ambushed

SUE was blushing under Steve Bennett's steady gaze, a thread of anger rising within her at his boldness. She was very glad indeed that Slim chose that minute to step up and ask if he might have the rest of that dance with her. Sue was quite as eager to talk to young Jackson as he seemed to be to question her. She set about at once, explaining her reasons for having tried to appear under an assumed name.

"The Cattlemen's Association sent me down here to audit Ace Cassiter's accounts," she said. "He's trying to float a big cattle loan. Of course it wasn't absolutely necessary for me to use another name, but I thought it would make my job easier. There's some other things I want to look into, too."

"But if you're Sue Crawford you know Ace, don't you?" Slim's voice was puzzled. "And wouldn't he have recognized you anyway?"

"Of course I know Ace. He was one of my father's best friends. But he hasn't seen me in five or six years, and never would have known me, though maybe old Blinkie, his foreman, would have. I rode with Blinkie a lot."

"Blinkie isn't with Ace any more. They had a falling out. Bart Henley is number-one man out to the Bar B now. A good foreman Bart is, too."

"That all you know about him?" Somehow Sue felt instinctively that she could trust Slim's judgment. Young as he was, he looked like a man who knew men and could discriminate between the good and the bad.

"Not all maybe, but Bart's on the level, if that's what you mean. He's a man you want for a friend and not for an enemy. Why?"

"Oh I just wondered who could take Blinkie's place. He was always so good at getting rustlers, and I hear there's been rustling going on lately. I'm just interested—it's the ranch in my blood, I suppose." There was a moment's silence while Slim guided Sue away from the thick of the crowd. Then she spoke again. "You knew my father, didn't you? Tell me about—how he died."

Slim cleared his throat, and when he spoke his voice was thick with sympathy.

"Can't tell you much, I'm afraid. Nobody knows anything except that he was killed, and the low-down coyote that shot him got away right enough. I wasn't sheriff then, but I was deputy, and we tracked down all

kinds of false leads. Fine fellow, your father."

"Yes, he was, and I'm going to find his murderer if it's the last thing I ever do."

Slim's clasp tightened about Sue.

"I'll shore help you, girl." The words sounded low in her ear. "I'll help you all I can, and that's a promise. There's some pretty desperate criminals around here, though. You ought to know that after this afternoon, and if they learn you're out for your father's murderer—well, you be careful."

"I will be," she laughed lightly. "And I'm sure I'll have help. Which reminds me, weren't you the one who fired at the holdups this afternoon from across the canyon?"

Sue was sure it hadn't been the sheriff; her mind was still clinging to Flash; but she wanted to find out for certain.

"No'm," he replied, rather apologetically. "Wish I had of been there to train my sights on some of them, and I'd sure admire to meet up with the hombre that did it. I could use the help of that fellow, whoever he is."

JUST then the music stopped, and looking around, Sue saw Lingo beckoning to her from the doorway. With a hasty excuse to Slim she crossed over to the stage driver.

He led her outside and down the board platform in front of the building, down to the farthest corner of the dance hall.

"Miss Crawford," Lingo spoke hastily, almost furtively. "I was top hand fer yore Daddy when he was killed."

"You were?" Sue's voice was eager. "Tell me—do you know anything about—about who did it?"

"Well now, I can't say who done the job, but I got suspicions. And there's one thing, mam, I do know sure. Soon as I learned who you was, I had to tell you. You been robbed."

"Robbed? How do you mean?"

Sue waited, breathless, for the man's answer.

"Well, I signed the paper, mam, as a witness. Remember yore Daddy's house? Look in the third door—"

Blam, blam. Twice the boom of a heavy gun at close range, while orange flame cut the darkness from the corner of the building. Slugs from a large caliber weapon tore into Lingo's body, their impact driving him forward against Sue. In the dull light from the dance hall she could see his eyes dilate strangely. Then he slid slowly down and lay doubled up at her feet.

It seemed an hour to Sue, but everything must have happened in a few seconds. Her scream rang out simultaneously with the second shot, and it seemed like another hour before the dancers began to pour from the building.

The first person to reach Sue was Slim. Grimly he leaned down and turned Lingo's face up to the light. A deep red smear was widening across the front of his flannel shirt. One of the bullets had gone through his heart.

"What happened?" Slim asked Sue tersely.

"I don't know. The shots came from that way somewhere." The girl pointed into the dark shadows around the dance hall.

"Get yore guns, men," Slim's voice clipped into the shocked silence. "The murderer hasn't had time to get far."

There were growls and angry mutterings in the crowd. Lingo had been popular, and with one accord the punchers swarmed into the darkness in search of his murderer. Slim turned again to Sue.

"You go back inside, you and Maude. Here, Blondie," he called to a figure just disappearing into the darkness. "Blondie, you take these girls inside and look out for them."

Maude turned to bury her head on Blondie's shoulder.

"Oh, Blondie, poor Lingo. And I'd just finished dancing with him."

"Yes, I know, honey." Blondie, now completedly sobered, patted her shoulder clumsily. "I'm sorry I acted like I did about that. Come on inside."

THE three of them walked back toward the dance hall. Sue was still trembling from the shock of her experience, and over and over in her mind went the thought that it was all her fault. If Lingo hadn't tried to tell her something about her father, she felt sure, he would still be alive. The third door? What did he mean? She found herself wishing desperately that Flash Williams would appear. He should know about this killing, and that Lingo had been shot down while giving Sue important information. He would know what to do.

They had barely reached the door when a commotion at the corner of the house stopped them.

"They must have found something," as Blondie spoke Slim rounded the corner of the building, walking at the head of an angry group of men. His face as he reached them was hard and set.

"Look here, Blondie, is this your gun?"

In his hand was a pearl-handled thirty-eight on a forty-five frame, a peculiar weapon that Blondie had had made especially for himself. Blondie removed his arm from Maude's shoulder and held out his hand for the gun. "Sure it's mine. Where did you get it? I left it in the dance hall on the table."

Slim's face went white. He glanced once at Maude's, at her eyes grown big with fright and wonder, and then back at Blondie.

"I hope some one saw you leave your gun there, Blondie," he said grimly. "Because Steve here just found it on the ground at the side of the building where Lingo was shot from."

With a deft flick of his hand, Slim flipped open the gun's cylinder. There were five shells in the chambers; two of them had been fired.

Blondie remained mute. He looked around at the group of faces. Except for Maude and Sue, they were all hard and unfriendly. None could vouch for his having left that gun inside. He swallowed hard and shook his head.

"Seems like no one was around when I left my hardware with the rest of them," he finally said, through dry lips.

"Then, Carter," Slim said slowly, "I'm warnin' you that anything you say may be used against you. I'm arrestin' you for the murder of Lingo."

IT was hard for Sue to leave Maude the next morning, but orders called for her to go at once to Ace's ranch and begin the checking of his books. She had finally soothed Maude's hysterical worry over Blondie by telling her about the work confronting the association.

"And so you see, Maude," she had ended her explanation, "I'm really sort of a detective, and an officer of the law, and I'm going to do everything I can to help get your Blondie out."

Now during the ten mile ride to the Bar B, Ace's ranch, that scene in the dance hall the night before stayed clear in Sue's mind.

After the first startled silence which had followed Slim's words, Maude had thrown herself on Blondie's shoulder and burst into tears. It had been hard for every one—hardest of all for Maude, and Long Slim.

"Don't you worry, Maude," Blondie had soothed, his anger at her entirely forgotten in this sudden demonstration of affection on her part. "I didn't shoot Lingo. It'll come out all right."

But things did look bad for

Blondie: the gun, his anger on leaving the dance hall, Lingo's dancing with Maude. Sue knew that the sentiment in Arrowhead was all against Blondie. He hadn't been in the neighborhood long enough to have made firm friends, not the age-old kind that Lingo had.

And there seemed to be no one else to accuse of the murder. Lingo had no enemies, everybody said. But Sue feared otherwise. She did not believe for a moment that Blondie had fired the shots which killed the old stage driver. They had been fired by some person who had wanted to prevent Lingo from telling her something about her father's affairs—some one quite desperate. She had thought of telling Slim of her conversation with Lingo, but decided against it. She wouldn't tell any one just yet. Instead she had tried to question Steve on his finding of Blondie's gun, but Slim had interrupted her.

"Three of us saw Steve pick the gun up," the sheriff had said. "He couldn't possibly have fired it, Miss Crawford."

"Why not?" Sue had instantly demanded, remembering her observations about Steve's character. "Anybody could have thrown it there after firing."

"Mam," Steve had stepped up to complain. "I'm sure sorry you think I'd kill old Lingo. I ain't never had more than two words with him, and they was both friendly."

"And that's more than Blondie can say," some voice in the crowd had put in. "More 'en one of us seen him make a play at Lingo in the dance hall recently."

AND there it had stood. Blondie in jail, and the murderer free. Would the unknown killer try to silence her next, Sue wondered to herself. She could hardly prevent a slight shudder of premonition, and she wished desperately that she could get in touch with Flash. She had counted on his help from the first, and she needed it now.

During her soliloquy Sue had been traveling at a gentle lope. As she topped the crest of a low hill she pulled her horse to a halt and gazed down at the scene before her. She could see the Bar B ranch house down there, squatting low under a cluster of gnarled orchard trees, its white adobe walls glaring blankly in the hot sun. Beyond the main house, on a slight rise of ground, loomed a commodious bunk house, and not far from it a circular horse corral, and a cluster of ramshackle old sheds.

As she looked upon the scene, Sue felt the keenest pang of homesickness that had assailed her since her return to the southwest. The Circle J, her old home, and the Bar B of Ace had started out as sister ranches, built up at the same time and by the same man. It seemed to Sue as she drew rein in front of the rambling structure that she was actually coming home.

As she dismounted a man came out the wide doorway and started down the steps toward her. She recognized Ace. He was older, more weary than she had remembered him, but the same kindly looking person who had been her father's best friend. He was still tall and erect, kingly indeed in bearing, with long silvery hair and eagle eyes set under wide black brows.

"And so this is little Susan Crawford?" were his first words.

Sue glanced at him in surprise.

"How did you know, Ace?" she stretched both hands out to him impulsively. "I didn't think you'd recognize me after so many years."

Ace patted her hands gently.

"I couldn't ever forget the little daughter of my best friend," he told her. "And besides, news travels mighty fast out here. The story of yesterday's holdup and your arrival reached me last night. I've been waiting for you to come home."

CHAPTER IV
A Discovery!

THEY walked up the steps of the ranch house and into Ace's office —a small room crowded with too many chairs, a large roll-top desk, and several book shelves. Ace had often come here with her father as a child. She remembered how she had loved to examine the pictures on the wall while her father talked to Ace. Photos of Ace as a cowpuncher in his younger days, photos of various of his range hands who had won fame in rodeos, long pictures of herds of cattle. In one corner of the room, above a small black safe, hung a large picture that was new since Sue had last been here. She crossed the space to it hurriedly, her eyes blurred with tears. It was an enlarged snapshot of her father, seated on his favorite horse, with the dim outlines of herds of cattle in the background.

She turned at the touch of Ace's hand on her arm. His harsh eyes softened with sympathy, his lips almost trembling as he spoke.

"He was a fine man, Sue, the finest I've ever known. I want you to know how glad I am that John Crawford's daughter has at last come back to the place where she belongs. Your father was everything to me. If it had been my own brother found dead out on the range that morning, I couldn't have felt the loss more deeply."

He motioned toward the swivel chair in front of the desk.

"Sit down here, my dear. I want to talk to you about what happened after your father died. You must have often wondered why I foreclosed a mortgage that left you penniless."

Sue shook her head as she sat down.

"No, I knew it was necessary or you wouldn't have done it, Ace. But why, did father ever mortgage the ranch? He never told me of it."

Ace shook his head slowly.

"I don't know," he said finally. "He wouldn't tell, even when he came to borrow so much money from me. I would have gone under too, sacrificed everything on the Bar B, rather than let him stand the gaff alone. But after he was killed, there seemed no need for the sacrifice, and I foreclosed to keep from going down myself. Things were in a bad way out here when your father died, Sue."

Sue nodded her head.

"They must have been," she agreed. "And in those months before he died, when father was borrowing money from you all the time, he never told me a word of it—not a word. And afterward there wasn't a cent, not even enough money for me to come home on."

"I worried about you, girl," Ace reached over to take her hand in his again. "I tried to find you, but you didn't tell any one where you were going when you left school. I hoped John Crawford's daughter would be my daughter; I wanted you to come live with me, and now that you're here, my dear, you must stay. You won't need to work again as long as I'm alive."

Sue laughed. "But I love my work," she told him. "That's why I'm here now, you know. I'm the Miss Martin the Cattlemen's Association told you was coming down to check your accounts for your loan."

Ace's eyes widened in startled surprise, and for an instant he looked at Sue almost angrily. Then his lips relaxed again into their genial smile.

"Well, I am surprised," he said. "When I wrote to them about that loan I never expected an old friend would be sent here to check up on me."

"Oh it isn't really checking up, Ace," Sue corrected him. "The association always investigates before they approve a loan on steers. It's just a rule, you know."

He nodded. "I understand. Times are still bad. When I took over the

Circle J, I thought I had saved myself, but between the rustling that's going on and losing nearly half my stock in last summer's drought—well, it just seems like I'll have to be borrowing all my life."

Sue rose abruptly. "Then let's get to work," she said. "The sooner you get this loan arranged, the better off you'll be. And what about the rustling? Isn't anything being done to stop it?"

"Not much." Ace was opening the safe and dragging from it several heavy ledgers, which he placed on the desk in front of Sue. "Seems like we can't get a line on who's doing it. Cattle just up and disappear. Don't know what's coming to this part of the world, with holdups and rustlers running the range."

He paused to open the first ledger before Sue. One long bony finger pointed out to her an entry on the page.

"Here, see? The first money I loaned your father. From there on you'll have to check the accounts. And here —" He indicated two account books in the lower drawer of the desk. "They were your father's. They'll show you what I took over from the Circle J after your father was killed."

Sue turned to Ace, her brown eyes looking deep and straight into his.

"Couldn't you ever find out who killed my father?"

Ace shook his head sorrowfully.

"No. God knows we tried, all of us. The Circle J boys came for me the morning they found him, under his dead horse out beyond Windy Rim Cañon, with a bullet through his brain. I don't see how any one could have hated your father, or wanted to harm him. He had no enemies. Robbery was the only motive we could find, because everything was gone from his pockets."

Ace opened a drawer of the desk and rummaged about in the papers inside, finally drawing out a cheaply printed handbill, yellowed with age. The face of John Crawford looked out at Sue from the grimy sheet, and above the blurred picture was a glaring black reward caption.

"See?" Ace placed the bill in Sue's unwilling hand. Their conversation had brought back to her all the horror of that day when the school matron had called her into the office to tell her that her father had been murdered. "I got these bills out myself. Offered a thousand-dollar reward for the capture of your father's murderer. But nothing ever came of it. Whoever did it got clean away."

"That was splendid of you," Sue turned kindly eyes on the man by her side. "I hate to think that the murderer is going free. But I know you did all you could."

"I'll leave you now," Ace returned the handbill to the desk drawer and closed it with a jerk. "You check what you can this morning—stay for dinner, of course. And don't think of going back to Arrowhead at all while you're on this job. I want my home to be your home, Sue."

Sue thanked him as graciously as she could, but in her heart she had no intention of staying at the Bar B. Much as she loved ranch life, and fond as she was of Ace, for her purpose the dingy little hotel at Arrowhead was far better. There she would have more chance of meeting people and hearing gossip.

With Ace gone, Sue turned at once to the work before her. His accounts were in good condition; it didn't take her long to see that. They showed conclusively that there were plenty of cattle on the Bar B ranch to float an even larger loan than Ace had asked for. If the cattle tallied out with the records, her report would be satisfactory.

WHEN she came to the books that had been her father's, she hesitated. It was hard to look at page

after page of his careful writing and realize that he would never write that small clear script again. It wasn't really necessary as far as the present loan went, to delve into these particular volumes, but a sudden curiosity as to how much Ace had taken over from the Circle J when he foreclosed his mortgage, impelled Sue to open the book on top. There were page after page of entries—so many steers to the Kansas City market, rent for pasture lands and water rights, everything meticulously recorded. She shook her head, puzzled.

"It's strange that Dad, who was so careful in everything else, would lose his ranch on a comparatively small mortgage," she told herself. "And it's queer that he doesn't show what he did with the money."

She realized with a start that but for her father's untimely death most of the cattle now ranging over the Bar B would be hers. And, furthermore, it appeared that there had been an abundance of stock on John Crawford's ranch to more than cover the mortgage. This made the matter of borrowing money even more difficult to understand.

It was almost noon when Sue checked the last item. She was just verifying the entry of a six-thousand dollar mortgage when Ace entered the office again. Sue looked up.

"I know you're anxious to hear how things came out," she told him. "Your accounts seem to be splendid, and the loan would have ample security. Just as soon as you can send some one with me to check up the cattle on the ranch with your accounts, I'll be happy to send in a good report."

A slight smile of gratification passed over Ace's rugged face before he spoke.

"I'll arrange that right away. You'll enjoy riding range again anyway, won't you?"

Sue nodded her head. She had been looking forward to that very thing.

"I'll tell you what. I'll call my foreman in right now and see if he can't take you around this afternoon for a preliminary survey of the herds."

Ace crossed to the corner of the room and pulled the worn bell cord that hung there.

"You like your new foreman? Seems to me it'd be hard for anybody to fill old Blinkie's place," Sue was waiting eagerly for Ace's answer.

"Yes, my new foreman's fine. A hard worker and very reliable. He's bought out a third interest in the ranch since he's been with me."

As the old man spoke there was a rap on the door; then it swung open, and a great hulk of a man was framed in the doorway. He looked at Ace inquiringly, and then at Sue. As his eyes fell on her they closed suddenly to mere slits, and his whole great frame grew tense. The huge hairy hands that hung nearly to his knees seemed to flutter and then creep stealthily to the two buck-handled revolvers protruding from the embroidered holsters on his hips.

"Oh," the startled exclamation was wrung from Sue in her surprise.

The man was crouching low now, his narrowed eyes darting from Sue to Ace. He looked every bit as dangerous as a coiled rattler. All three of them stood frozen for a moment; then the man, with two catlike steps to the rear, was out of the door and gone, and they could hear his heavy footsteps running down the hall.

"Quick," Sue grasped Ace's arm. "Get him, quick. That was the holdup man, the one I tore the mask from. Quick. I'd know him anywhere."

Ace's eyes widened. He passed his hand over his forehead as if to clear an addled brain.

"There's some mistake," the words came thickly from his lips. "That was Bart Henly, my foreman."

For one startled second Sue stood looking into Ace's eyes, while the sound of running steps died in the

distance. Then she seized his arm angrily.

"Are you going to stand there and do nothing while he gets away?" she demanded.

"My dear girl," Ace's voice was soothing, and he patted her hand gently as he spoke. "There is no place for Bart to go. I don't know what got hold of him to act like that, but he won't leave the ranch, I'm sure. He has too many interests around here. And, besides, you must be mistaken."

"I'm not," she shot back heatedly. "He ran away. Doesn't that prove I'm right?"

Ace seemed to have regained his composure, and he now shook his head and laughed.

"Well, Bart's a little peculiar at times. He isn't much of a ladies' man. I expect seeing you scared him."

"I'll bet it did," Sue said grimly. "But it wasn't just because he's afraid of women. And I'm going to scare him some more. If you don't do something about this right away, Ace, I'm riding to Arrowhead for the sheriff."

The old cattleman stepped over and laid his hand on hers.

"Now, Sue," he said. "Don't get excited. If you insist upon accusing my foreman of robbery I'll see that he answers your charges. But there isn't any use of stirring up a lot of trouble. I don't like a representative of the Cattlemen's Association to think I have an outlaw in my employ. If you want, I'll even see that Bart goes to jail."

He threw back his head and burst into hearty laughter.

"That would be a good joke on Bart," he roared. "Let him cool himself off in the calaboose for a while. Of course he'd get bail," Ace went on. "But it would sure give us all something to joke him about."

Sue was more than a little shaken. Ace seemed so sure of his foreman's honesty, and the ranchman was a person of experience in judging character. She knew that. Perhaps after all she was mistaken. One fleeting glimpse of a man's face under a mask was hardly enough to convict a respectable person of highway robbery. But she had been trained to remember faces, and Bart's face was of most unusual contour. And hadn't she practically read guilty admission in the man's eyes when he faced her in the office just now? She drew back from Ace's reassuring arm.

"Well, I won't say anything one way or the other just yet," she told him, slowly. "But I don't think I care to tally cattle today. I'll come out tomorrow, and we can talk this thing over again."

Ace persisted in his offer of hospitality for the night, but Sue was equally insistent upon leaving. She wanted to talk to Slim and a few others in town. She wouldn't make any false accusations, but she was certainly going to check up on Mr. Bart Henley. A wire to the association might bring some information on the man's past, and the quicker she got it off the better.

CHAPTER V
Ride for Life

ACE walked with her to the veranda and called to a cowboy lolling on the corral fence to bring Sue's horse. Ace held the stirrup while Sue mounted. The cowboy handed her the reins and stepped back.

"Good-by, Sue," the old ranchman doffed his sombrero with a kindly smile. "See you tomorrow. And please, don't cause any trouble yet—about—you know."

With a brief little nod in reply, Sue turned her horse.

"Hey, miss," the little cowboy called suddenly. "You done forgot your quirt."

Sue reined in with a jerk. She had brought no quirt with her, yet the man

was running toward her with one in his hand. He laid his left hand lightly on the horse's mane, and held up the whip with the other so that she could slip her wrist through the loop. He had round blue eyes, and one of them closed slowly in a deliberate wink. As Sue slid her hand through the rawhide thong, the man deftly slipped a piece of paper into her palm and stepped back. Without a word in response, Sue put spurs to her horse.

Her heart pounded madly as her pony stretched out in response to the urgent pressure of her heels. Who was this message from? What would it say? She dared not look while still in sight of the ranch, but once around a small hill at the turn to the Arrowhead trail, she pulled her mount into a walk and unrolled the crumpled sheet of paper. There were but four words scrawled there, but at sight of them her heart almost stopped beating.

"Ride for your life." The words read, and under them were the numerals she had been looking for—"32."

Sue didn't for a second question her danger. If Flash Williams said to ride for her life, it was time to go.

The pony Maude had loaned her was small and lithe, range bred. Sue thought to herself as he leaped forward under the sudden lash of the quirt. She smiled grimly. No wonder the cowboy had given it to her; he knew she would need it. Ten miles was a long run. The horse could lope all day, but a run was different. She would just have to let him have his head, hold him down a little to reserve something for a spurt, if that proved necessary.

"But that wasn't Flash Williams at the ranch—that man who gave me the note," she told herself suddenly, her mind working back to Flash's identity even under the strain of her present predicament. "That cowboy was too small."

One of the few definite things she knew about Flash was that he was a good six feet tall. This little fellow must be someone in his employ. "Well, the solution would have to wait. The main thing just now was to figure out the trail ahead. She wasn't going to run into any ambush if she could help it.

THE road followed the winding course of a dry stream bed, leaving open country well to both sides. Except for the waterway, there were few places for an assassin to hide with any kind of a getaway. The stream bed itself was not deep. Although a man could lie or kneel under its banks and still be hidden, a horse could not find cover in its sandy course. Sue glanced back. There was no one on her trail. Ahead was no sign of life. For the moment at least she felt secure.

But about four miles from town, a hill, from whose shape Arrowhead derived its name, approached close to the road. She could see it several miles away, the red solid base, arrogant, bold, uptilted.

"That will be the place," she told herself, pulling the pony down to a steady lope. "If any one's after me, that's where he will be."

Swiftly the miles slid under the pony's hoofs, and the hill came closer and closer, its formidable height seeming to crush her under by its very shadow. Ahead on that hill lay danger, Sue was certain. There were rocks and crevices and gullies on its sides, a hundred places for a man to hide. Holes hewn out by the weather for just such an occasion as this.

The trail hugged close to the rocky mesa for a way and then curved out into the plain three miles from Arrowhead. Sue's eyes scanned the sides of the promontory closely as she came within range.

Suddenly she threw herself forward on her horse's neck and drove the

spurs home deep. High up on the crest, silhouetted against the clear blue of the sky, she had detected a slight movement, as of a man's head rising up to look down on the trail below.

Crack. A high-powered bullet snapped through the air a foot or so behind her. Her horse was low to the ground now, seeming to sense the danger, giving all he had. Sue swerved him to the right, suddenly heading for the open plain. Zing. Another bullet ploughed up dirt ahead and ricochetted off across the sand of the road. Sue twisted her mount again, running him like one chasing a jack rabbit, all turns and twists.

Again the high-powered rifle sent its long range projectile after her. This time it whined viciously as it passed. She set a course quartering from the bluff, to give the marksman neither a leading nor a straight away shot. She set her muscles against the impact of a bullet. The man must have the range now, she thought, and the next shot would find her.

She lay well down on the horse's neck and clenched her teeth to keep from crying out in the agony of her suspense. It came again, the report of a rifle but more distant this time, and she heard no bullet. She drove her mount on, waiting for the next attempt, but firing seemed to have ceased.

Sue rode well beyond range before slacking the wild pace of her pony. Then she slowed down to a canter and looked back over her shoulder. There was no sign of life, nor anything to indicate that some one seeking her life had lain hidden up there.

"Missed me that time," she assured herself, after a careful survey. "But I wonder if they won't try it again."

She turned her mount slightly to the left now and headed straight for Arrowhead. In the rarefied atmosphere, it could be seen so distinctly as to seem not more than a few hundred yards away. The sight of the sleepy little town was reassuring to Sue. Then she saw something that made her bring her spurs down on her horse's flanks with a vicious jab. Simultaneously her quirt went into action, and the little pony pounded madly over the dry plain.

From an arroyo on the side of the hill a horseman had sprung suddenly into sight, his moving figure emerging glaringly from the dull side of the rock that had thus far hidden him. He was riding hard, setting a course that would intercept Sue about a mile from the town.

"Wants to try finishing me at close range, does he?" Sue said between clenched teeth. "Well, he's going to be surprised." And she reached into her bosom and brought out her own gun. "Whoever you are," she darted a venomous glance at the speeding horseman, "you'll find out I can shoot as well as the next one, at close range."

THE race was going to be close. Sue had the shorter distance, but the man had the better mount. Even though she felt herself in dire peril, Sue could not help but thrill at the picture of the oncoming rider. It was like the flight of a hawk skimming the ground—easy, graceful, and with the speed of a swooping falcon. Gillies and boulders were taken in full flight with no apparent effort.

"A thoroughbred," Sue's eyes sparkled with admiration for the horse, "and a beautiful one. That man, whoever he is, can ride."

She drew in slightly on her reins. The race was useless; the man would reach a position to bar her path to town. Already he had checked his horse so abruptly that the animal was jerked back on his haunches. Cautiously Sue approached, her gun hidden behind her saddle horn. With a start she recognized the man before her. It was Steve Bennett, as hand-

some, as smiling, as arrogant as when she had seen him at the dance the night before.

Then she saw that a high-powered rifle protruded from a boot under his left leg.

"Howdy, Miss Crawford," Steve greeted her with a slight smile of triumph. "That's sure a good cayuse you got, but he don't stand no show with old Lightnin' Bug here."

"No," she admitted. "I suppose not. No more show than I'd have at long range against you with that rifle you have."

"This?" He slapped the butt of the gun and let his hand run down its stock.

"Don't touch it," Sue snapped, flashing her own hand gun into view. "You try to pull a gun on me now and I'll certainly kill you."

Steve's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Sure, you don't mean you'd shoot me, mam?" he inquired good-naturedly.

Their horses had sidled and fidgeted around until now Sue had her back to the little town and could see the high hill from which the shots had poured down upon her.

"Why not?" she said. "You tried to shoot me."

"Me? No, mam." There was hurt surprise in the low tones of Steve's voice. "I ain't out gunin' for no ladies, mam."

"I suppose you'll tell me that your rifle hasn't been fired."

The man shook his head.

"I cain't tell you that, mam, because it has been shot. Just a little while back I tried my luck on a coyote up on the mesa."

Sue flushed angrily.

"Coyote? And missing your coyote at such a distance you thought you'd come down off that hill and make sure of your work at close range," she accused.

Steve's eyes looked steadily into hers and he shook his head sorrowfully.

"This is the second crime you've tried to saddle me with, Miss Crawford," he chided. "And I ain't no more guilty of this one than the first. If any low-down skunk has been taking pot shots at you it wasn't me. Why'd I want to hurt you, anyway?"

"Well, some one has been shooting at me," Sue told him. "And the shots came from that hill you just rode down from. If it wasn't you that did it, what were you doing up there?"

"Well, mam, I been out with Slim, the sheriff. He made me his deputy this morning and we was over lookin' around the place where the stage got held up yesterday and had a wagon along to bring in Lon Gray. We followed some tracks aways, and then Slim sent me back to get Blondie some dinner. Slim went on scouting, and I cut across the mesa for town. When I came down out of that arroyo I saw you putting your horse in a run, so I just cut across for a race."

Sue had been searching his face closely as he spoke. If the man was a liar, she thought, he certainly was a good one.

"You may be an officer of the law," she said finally, "I suppose Slim wouldn't have deputized you if he hadn't trusted you some, but if it's just the same to you I'll ask you to ride back into town in front of me."

This dark insinuation penetrated even Steve's habitual good nature and the blood poured up into his tanned face. He opened his lips as if to speak, then closed them again until the smile had returned to his face.

"All right, mam. If you want to bring me in a prisoner, I don't know any one I'd rather surrender to." Again Sue felt the blue flame of his glance on hers. Then his expression altered suddenly. "Maybe we better wait, though, mam, to see who this is that's burning leather out of town to get to us so quick."

Sue looked quickly over her shoulder. There was indeed a rider bearing down upon them, clouded in a flurry of dust. She was jerked around again by Steve's amused laugh, and the sound of his mocking voice.

"Let me give you some advice, mam. Anytime you throw a gun on a man, don't you look behind you, no matter what he says."

It was Sue's turn to flush with mortification. He was right. No one having the drop should ever take eyes from the person being covered. Against her will, against her better judgment, Sue suddenly felt a lurking admiration for this man before her.

She pulled her horse back so as to be in position to watch both Steve and the approaching rider.

"Why, it's Maude," she cried, recognizing the small figure bent forward on the horse's neck, belaboring it frantically with whip and spur.

"Yes'm," replied Steve, his face becoming grave. "And from the way she's coming, I reckon something must be wrong."

Even as he spoke Maude came within hailing distance.

"Steve, Sue, hurry," she screamed to them, and coming close she reined her horse up in a pawing cloud of dust. "Come quick. They're going to lynch Blondie."

"Lynch Blondie? Why? What do you mean?" cried Steve.

Maude was gasping for breath, and tears trembled in her eyes.

"It's Gila and his Box A punchers, the very men Blondie's worked with. They're going to break in the jail and take Blondie out and hang him for killing Lingo."

CHAPTER VI
Lynch Mad!

WITHOUT a word Steve clapped spurs to his thoroughbred and was gone. The girls raced after him, but he drew away almost as though they were not even moving.

"Whatever has gotten into Gila?" Sue flung the word to Maude as they tore through the dusty swirl that Steve had left behind him. "Why does *he* want to lynch Blondie?"

"I don't know," Maude cried back. "They're all drinking and half crazy, and when Gila gets drunk he's just plain killer. He and Lingo were friends, and Blondie's only been one of his punchers for a few months."

They all seemed to be killers in this country, Sue thought to herself. She didn't know who could be trusted. It all seemed a hopeless tangle.

Neck and neck she and Maude reached the little town and thundered down the main street.

The jail was at the opposite end of the long street. In front of it the girls could see a crowd of men milling about in the dust, surging toward the door of the building. As they drew up on the outskirts of the mob they could see Steve Bennett already standing on the steps, leaning easily against the door, his thumbs hooked into his cartridge belt just above the two guns resting loosely in their holsters. His blue eyes, mocking, alert as ever, were staring calmly out over the crowd. Directly in front of Steve, his attitude defiant, his arms gesticulating wildly, was Gila with the Box A cow hands behind him. Surging about in their rear, curious, mildly excited, was an assorted group of punchers and townspeople.

"An' so, Mr. Deputy, we aims to take that gopherin' gun slinger outen that there shebang," Gila was saying. "We has a nice new necktie we calculates to try on him, an' we allows as how we'll do it right now."

Steve's face bore its most amiable smile as he shook his head and spoke firmly.

"It just can't be done, gents," he said. "The sheriff give me orders that Blondie Carter don't leave this jail,

and I aims to see that them orders are carried out."

There was an ominous growl from the assembled mob. Gila raised a solemn hand to still the noise and turned again to Steve.

"We hopes to conduct a quiet proceedin', Mr. Man, without no war play nor lead throwin'. A life fer a life is what the law says, an' thet's all we asks. O' course if this here is bargain day we might be persuaded to collect two fer one. Thet's up to you, I reckon."

"Better give him the other end of the rope," called a voice from the mob. "He was the enterprisin' hombre thet found thet there gun. He might know more about the killin' than he's told."

"Maybe I do," Steve shot back, trying to distinguish who had spoken. "And I'm willing to tell it in a proper court of law."

"You can't put us off thataway," another voice yelled.

It was evident to Sue and Maude that the mob was out of hand and dangerous. These men were determined to take Blondie, and they would include Steve too on small provocation. It was an ugly business, but the deputy still smiled and leaned casually against the door.

His watchful lethargy was bold, mocking almost, and it seemed to infuriate Gila. With a significant look at the men behind him, he spoke his final ultimatum.

"We gives you one minute to clear out, an' then we comes a-smokin'."

Steve did not speak. But he swung suddenly erect, and then slowly crouched. The smile was gone now, and his eyes seemed glazed and hard. His lips thinned to a tight hard line, and every nerve in his body was drawn to breaking point. His elbows came in close to his body, ready for the circular sweep of the forearms that would bring up two guns streaming fire and lead. His hands opened, fingers slightly curved. They hung suspended, quivering like birds ready for flight. Never had Sue seen a more deadly posture. She knew that her first estimate of the man was correct. He was a killer.

Despite the repugnance she felt for the type usually designated by that name, she could not refrain from open admiration for this man's courage. To face, singlehanded, fifty or sixty desperate violators of the law, knowing that they were in a drunken mood and anxious to kill, was bravery of the first order. Good or bad, this Steve Bennett was a *man*.

Sue did not remain idle, however, as these thoughts went through her head. After those last slow words of Gila's, the silence tensed, ready to break into gunfire and the death of men, and Sue drove her horse suddenly into the crowd.

"Come on, Maude," she cried, and knocking men right and left, she pushed through to the door of the jail.

Flinging herself from her mount, she whirled upon the startled mob, gun in hand.

"Hey," yelled the men, and fell back in ludicrous confusion. A double-barreled gunman they could understand. But a crazy woman brandishing a loaded pistol filled them with consternation. They couldn't shoot at a lady; yet they were in grave danger of being shot at.

"Put thet gun down," Gila ordered sternly. "We ain't no holdups, mam."

"No," Sue turned on him in a fury. "You haven't even that much courage. You want to drag out a defenseless man and hang him. You're cowards, all of you."

"He's a murderer, Miss Crawford, like the man that killed your own father," cried Johnson, who ran the Mercantile Store.

Sue's eyes shifted to him, and she retorted quickly.

"You'll be murderers too if you kill Blondie Carter without a trial. Why

don't you get after the real outlaws? The ones you're sure of. Bart Henley, for instance, who leads them."

There were hoots of derision and laughter at her words.

"What?" "Bart Henley?" "You're crazy." The phrases came at her in unison from various sectors of the restless crowd in front of her.

"Crazy, am I?" she cried. "Well, get Bart then, and let me face him. I tell you he's the man I pulled the mask from at the stage holdup yesterday. He's the man who had somebody shoot at me not more than an hour ago. And you stay here trying to hang an innocent boy when the real outlaws are loose. For all I know they may be among you right now."

THE crowd shifted nervously at her words. Men looked speculatively at one another. Who indeed could be sure of his neighbor's habits in this bandit-infested country?

"Here's Gila now," Sue was quick to follow up her advantage. "He's trying to put the blame for a killing on poor Blondie, while another of his own cowhands was in the holdup. You all know about that. How many more of his men are outlaws?"

The Box A men looked uncomfortable, and some of the townsmen drew back from them. Gila glowered fiercely, but Sue had her gun trained squarely on him as she continued.

"While your sheriff is out right now looking for the bandits, you take advantage of his absence to steal his prisoner and commit a cowardly act that you will be ashamed of for the rest of your lives. And Steve here—" she turned and stood in surprised silence. Steve was gone.

For the second time within an hour, Sue was guilty of looking away when she had the drop. Gila had been hoping for this very thing, and he was quick to take advantage of her mistake. He sprang forward and had her gun in a second.

"Get inside, you jaspers, and bring out thet hemp bait," he roared. Sue could smell the reek of liquor on his breath.

His own men obeyed him eagerly, rushing the frail door and battering it down as easily as if it had been made of paper. The townsmen remained where they were, worried, nervous. Sue writhed powerless in Gila's grasp.

"Now I know you for what you really are," she raged at her captor. "You're nothing but a dirty, low-down outlaw."

"Mam, you don't sabe business like this here. We only aims—" but he did not finish.

The Box A men were crowding back out of the jail, angry consternation on their flushed faces.

"Gila," they cried, almost in unison. "There ain't no one there. The jail's plum empty."

Sue felt a surge of relief at the men's words. What had happened seemed evident to her. Steve had taken Blondie out the back door; probably they were well on their way toward safety now. But there was no time to think much of them, for angry and excited punchers were clustering about her and Gila, pushing, crowding, swearing.

Gila released Sue slowly. As she watched his face she saw his clouded eyes begin to clear. The surprise of finding the prisoner gone was evidently going to sober him quickly. The girl held out her hand to him for her gun, and he returned it as if in a daze.

"Well," she said sarcastically. "Perhaps you'd like to hang me now that you haven't got anybody else to lynch?"

Her angry eyes flared into the sobered ones of Gila.

"Mam," he retorted. "While we aims to respect all ladies, an' John Crawford's daughter in perticular, we'd admire to know just what kind

of a gun-totin' female is in our midst. An' how come you to horn in on our affairs? Seems like a lady's place ain't at this kind of a party."

"You think so, do you?" The men turned at the sound of another feminine voice. Maude had plunged through the crowd and stood at the bottom of the steps. "You'd like to know about her, would you? Well, I'll tell you, you nosey old lizard, though Sue asked me not to let it get out. She's an accredited representative of the Cattlemen's Association, and a regularly sworn in officer of the law. And that's more than any of you low-down coyotes are."

There was a gasp of astonishment from the crowd. The punchers drew back, abashed.

"Is thet a fact, mam?" asked the Box A foreman, his jaw sagging.

"Yes, it is," Sue answered, her temper still ruffled by the treatment she had received. "And I have my credentials with me to prove it if you want to see them."

Gila shook his head.

"I guess we takes yore word fer it, Miss Crawford. An' I rises now to make apologies fer manhandlin' you. Looks like we acted a little like we been a-eatin' loco weed. If you tells us how we can help you we air under yore orders from now on out. Ain't that fair enough?"

Sue's eyes softened under this attempt at an honorable amend. She reached out and shook the old man's hand to seal the bargain.

"First tell me," she said, "why you were so eager to hang Blondie. You don't know he's guilty, do you?"

Gila nodded, then said:

"Well, mam, I'll tell you. When I gets home to the Box A ranch I took me a look at Lon Gray's war bag. An' dinged if we didn't find a whole pile of loot—masks, an' things thet didn't leave no argument about him bein' a maverick. It got me so mad I went through the whole bunkhouse, an' under Blondie Carter's blankets we finds the same kind of junk."

"It's a lie," Maude's voice rang out.

"No'm, it's the truth right enough," spoke up one of the punchers earnestly. "We was all there to keep cases."

"Maybe the evidence was planted," Sue suggested. "And anyhow that doesn't mean he killed Lingo."

"Might be planted," Gila acknowledged doubtfully. "Only we didn't figure thet way. We ain't known Blondie any great while, an' it's hard to tell about men."

"Now, listen," Sue changed the subject abruptly. "Let me tell you all what I know because I may not live long enough to tell any one else if I don't speak now."

The men's minds were caught by this bold statement, and the circle crowded in closer.

"First, the reason that Lingo was killed, I'm sure, was because he knew something about my father's murder and was telling me when he was shot down. You all know Blondie couldn't have been connected with father's death. He wasn't even near here then, so why should he kill Lingo?"

This put a new light on the affair. The listeners eagerly begged her to go on.

"And the next thing," Sue complied. "You didn't believe me when I told you a minute ago that Bart Henley, Ace's foreman himself, that you all think so much of, was the holdup man I jerked the mask from at the stage robbery. You didn't believe me, but it's true."

"Oh, come now. It don't hardly seem reasonable, Miss Crawford. You must be mistaken," Gila protested. But Sue went on to tell of her encounter with Bart in Ace's office. Again her sincerity and straightforward words convinced them. They were for moving on to the Bar B ranch en masse and administering the rude justice they had been so ready

to accord to Blondie. But Sue begged them to wait.

"There's still something else," she said. "On my way home from the Bar B, I was ambushed and fired on by some one up on the high mesa near the Arrowhead four miles out of town. Some of you men are good trackers. Why not go up there and see if there's any trail to follow? If there is, we might find out something that will help untangle this lawlessness."

"Mam," said old Gila, "we does as you say. Ol' Squint Simms here can track a fly through air. Even if thet skunk what tried to lead you up flew offen the hill, we gets him." He turned sharply to his men. "Get goin'. Fork leather. Miss Crawford, we'll be back afore dark with thet jasper's scalp."

CHAPTER VII

Lead-Poisoning

THE punchers swarmed down to the hitching rack in front of the Elite Dance Hall and disappeared in a smother of dust. Sue and Maude were escorted back to the hotel by Johnston and some other of the townsmen. Once in the safety of Sue's room the two girls sat down and put their arms around each other. Both were feeling a nervous reaction from the strain of the past half-hour, and tears were close to the surface.

"Where do you suppose Blondie is?" Maude demanded, with half a sob in her voice.

"I don't know," Sue's hand was mechanically patting Maude's shoulder, while her mind worried over this same question. "But somehow I think he's safe with Steve Bennett. That man impressed me as a mighty capable sort of person."

"Why, I thought you didn't like him," Maude's blue eyes opened wide in surprise.

"I don't. At least I think I don't." A faint smile brought the dimple into Sue's cheek. "I believe he's the one that tried to shoot me, and a girl can't be expected to care much for a man who ambushes her with a rifle. But"—she was serious again now—"Steve surely played the man out there in front of the jail. He was ready to fight all of Arrowhead to save Blondie."

Molly permitted a faint sniff to escape her.

"If he isn't a coward, what did he run away for?"

"Why, Maude," Sue was surprised. "Don't you think he did the right thing? Supposing he had stayed there. Gila and those punchers would have gotten both him and Blondie before I could talk them into seeing reason."

"I suppose so," Maude admitted reluctantly. "But just the same I wish I knew where Blondie is now. I want to ask him about those things they found in his bunk."

"Don't you worry about those now. He's better off where he is," Sue pointed out. "The way these people are feeling it would be just as well for him to stay out of their sight for a few days, or at least until Slim gets back. They all seem to respect your brother, Maude."

"I'm worried about him, too," Maude burst out. "I don't like to have him running around alone. Two other sheriffs before him have been shot down. I wish he'd resign. I don't like this business at all."

Maude was close to the breaking point now. Worry for Blondie's quite evident danger, and anxiety over possible harm to Slim were confused in her tired mind. Sue soothed and petted her, and finally induced her to rest for awhile until Gila and his men returned with a report of their search on the mesa.

With the younger girl out of the way, Sue's mind returned to her encounter that morning with Bart Henley. There was a certainty in the back of her mind that the association could link him up with a past. Hurriedly

Sue could hear the men's heavy breathing and saw them going into the half crouch of gunmen ready to explode into action.

she dragged her code book from her suitcase and wrote out a description of him to forward to the main office. Their records of badmen were so complete that it was entirely possible they could identify him.

After she sent the telegram there was a knock on her door, and in response to her "come in," Johnston of the Mercantile Store stuck his head into the room.

"We thought you'd like to know, mam, that Gila and the boys are coming back," he said softly, heeding Sue's warning motion not to waken Maude. "I seen them about a mile out, headed this way."

Sue hurried downstairs.

"There they are," the hotel keeper, in the midst of an excited bunch of townspeople, was pointing up the dusty trail. "An' some one's been hurt. You can tell that."

Far out the road Sue could see the

Box A men returning. There was something sinister about the approach of the little cavalcade, she thought, as she watched the slow-moving procession. There was none of the sky-larking one usually sees in a group of cow punchers riding together—no singing, no laughter, not even the assured air about them that a successful trip should have given. Each man sat his horse, looking straight to the front, and their pace was deliberate.

As they came to the outskirts of Arrowhead, the riders crowded into a small compact group as if to hide something, but not soon enough to prevent Sue from seeing that they had a lead horse. And over the saddle was an inert body, swaying and flopping with the movement of the horse's stride.

"Who is it?" Sue's voice was strained. She was tensing every muscle as she waited for Johnston's answer.

The man looked at her strangely and moved a little away. He was embarrassed, worried, fearful. Evidently he thought he knew who that was, riding face down, but he didn't want to tell.

Gila saw Sue standing there in the roadway, and leaving his men he loped ahead to speak to her. But when he arrived and drew his horse to a halt he seemed at a loss for words.

"Tell me," cried Sue, with a thick catch in her throat. "Who is it?"

"Mam," the old cowman said, "we pasiared out to the spot you told us about. Didn't have no trouble findin' it at all, mam. And we finds a dead man. He was a-layin' up behind a big rock where he could see the road down below."

"That would be the man," Sue's words came quickly. "That would be the one that shot at me."

"Well now, if he had been doin' any shootin' or not we couldn't say, cause some one had beat us there. Whatever coyote got ahead of us took the feller's guns an' belts, if he had any. Nary sight of a gun around."

"But who is he?" Sue repeated the question impatiently. "Who is he?"

Gila shifted his cud and fidgeted about uncomfortably in his saddle.

Finally, he said:

"Well, mam, it's hard to say. Some one done drilled him from behind, clean through the head. The bullet came out in front against the rock his face was hid against, an' spattered. Lookin' at what's left o' him, we ain't just sure who he is."

Sue repressed a shudder at the mental picture Gila's explanation drew up in her mind.

"But the horse," she insisted. "Surely you know whose horse it is. A thoroughbred like that's unmistakable."

Again Gila shifted uneasily and looked back at his men, who had now closed up behind him. They all acted uncomfortable, almost frightened. Before Gila could answer Sue's last question, however, Maude came flying from the hotel. The crowd of people collecting below had awakened her, and she had hurried down for the news. The men tried to shift their mounts to bar her path, when they saw her coming, but they were too late. She had already seen the horse and its limp burden.

FOR a moment she stared, horrified, her hands stretched out before her clutching at the air. Then she turned to Sue. She tried to speak, but the words failed to come. She took two faltering steps, her hand groping blindly for her friend, and then collapsed in the road.

Sue fell to her knees beside the girl and gathered the limp little bundle into her arms.

"Tell me," she demanded angrily of Gila. "What's the matter. Is it Blondie on that horse?"

"No'm," replied Gila hoarsely. "The

horse belongs to her brother, Slim, the sheriff."

The men carried Maude into the hotel and placed the stricken girl on Sue's bed. Then Sue took Gila to one side.

"If that man out there is Slim," she told him, "then he's the one who shot at me."

"But we ain't sure it *is* Slim," protested Gila. "It don't stand to reason thet our sheriff would be takin' pot shots at you, Miss Crawford."

"Who do you think it is then?" she demanded.

"They ain't no way of tellin'. Whoever messed his face up an' took off his things didn't leave no brand fer us to go by. The only thing makes it look like it was Slim is his horse."

"Where did you find the horse?"

"Grazin' about half a mile away, up on the mesa. No signs around him, exceptin' blood on the saddle."

"Blood on the saddle?" Sue's eyes lighted with excited hope. "Then it couldn't have been Slim behind that rock."

"How do you figger thet, mam?" Gila's voice was hopeless.

"Why, don't you see?" Sue hurried into her explanation. "If Slim was shot while he was on his horse, he couldn't have been lying by the boulder, and the man lying so as to be shot through the head and the bullet hitting the rock couldn't have been on a horse. Something must have happened to Slim, but that man can't be him."

Gila looked at the girl with admiration clearing the frown from his grizzled face.

"Yo're certainly correct," he said to her. "Some one must have drygulched the sheriff and then gone on to beef thet hombre on the cliff."

Sue's mind flew instantly to Steve. "Took a shot at a coyote up on the mesa," he had told her. Which man did that mean he had shot? Or had he killed both of them? A feeling of repulsion swept over her at the thought of the killer coming with red hands to ride into town with her. He was a killer sure enough. But why had he taken Blondie away? The whole thing was too much for Sue to solve in one minute. For the present they must all concentrate on finding Slim.

"Listen, Gila," she said. "There's only one thing to do as I see it. We've got to locate Bart Henley and make him talk. He was the leader of that stage holdup, and he must know something about these other terrible crimes. Can't you go out and get him?"

Gila stood up, a light of determination in his eyes.

"Mam," he said. "We'll go right now. But it'll sure be serious business. Bart Henley is a bad man to make medicine with, or least ways everybody's figured he was. I sees now that Bart has most of us buffaloed, but we'll get him. They may be some smoke over this, though. Ace ain't goin' to put up with us a-comin' after his foreman, but after him we goes."

Sue placed both hands on the shoulders of the old cowman. She was a tall girl, and they stood eye to eye.

"I hate to ask men to go into danger, Gila, but if you ever want to see law and order in this country it has to be done. I'd go with you, but I can't leave Maude here alone, and she's in no shape to go anywhere now."

"Shore we knows all thet, girl. We wouldn't let you go if you could. We aims to make this as peaceful as we can, but if it comes to throwin' lead, my punchers are as good as Ace's any day. You stay here an' don't worry none about us. Tell Miss Maude to buck up. We'll clean this thing up right, and we'll bring Slim back, too."

"I'll tell her," Sue promised. "And good-bye." And before old Gila knew what she was doing, a kiss had been

planted on his grizzled cheek. The old foreman stumbled out in confusion, but as he reached the men waiting below for him his face grew stern and set.

"Take thet body down to the jail and leave it there," he directed tersely. "And then every man look to his ammunition. To-night we goes to the Bar B and brings in Bart Henley." Without further words, he mounted, grimly, and moved north along the road to the Bar B ranch.

CHAPTER VIII

The Third Door

MAUDE was hard to soothe, wrought up as she was by the double loss of lover and brother. But Sue finally managed to quiet the distracted girl and get her into the diningroom, where an early supper was being served. As they took their seats at the long table, the telegraph operator entered the room.

"Here's an answer to your wire," he said, tossing a yellow envelope before Sue. "You sure must have some pull to have it given priority over the wires this way."

Sue tore open the envelope. The message was in code, so she excused herself from the curious crowd around and hurried up to her room to decipher it. It took at least ten minutes to translate the cryptic words. Then she stood up close to the window to read the message. Dim twilight was flooding the room; she was forced to lean close to the paper.

"Description answers that of George Russel, Texas gunman. Wanted in three states. Be careful."

A wave of exultation swept over Sue. She had been right, she was sure about Bart. In her own mind there was no doubt that Bart and George Russel were one and the same man. The name brought a flood of detail to her mind. The association had been tracing that person for years; he was one of the worst badmen of the west. She turned toward the door again; suddenly there was a sharp shattering of glass, and something fell at her feet. She crouched low beneath the level of the window, waiting breathlessly for the shot which she was sure would follow.

Then she saw that the missile which had shattered the window was a stone which now lay at her feet. Tied to it was a piece of soiled paper. Sue seized it eagerly, but still kept low, out of range of the person who had thrown it. Hastily she untied the string that held the paper to the stone and scanned its contents.

"Outlaws have sheriff at Circle J. Get help and come before ten to-night. If you can't, tell the folks so-long for me. 32."

Flash, calling for help. And before ten. Sue glanced at her watch. It was now six-thirty, and the Circle J, her old home, was eighteen miles away. Get help, the message said, and the only person she could turn to was Gila, now halfway to the Bar B. It would take too long to organize the Arrowhead citizens.

There was just one thing to do. She hurried back to the hotel dining room and almost dragged Maude from her chair.

"Maude," the words tumbled over one another, so quickly did she speak. "You'll have to ride after Gila. Tell him to forget everything and come to the Circle J, Dad's old ranch, you know. Tell him to hurry. You understand, Slim's in danger."

Maude's wide-eyed nod of understanding came without a second's hesitation. Now, with some definite task to do, her spell of weakness disappeared. She became cool, steady, resourceful.

"They keep fresh horses out behind the hall," she said. "You going with me?"

"No, I haven't time. You're a brave girl to start out this way. I'll meet you and Gila at the Circle J. Make them get there in time. I have to be there right away."

Sue dashed out the door, ran down the street and around the corner to the rear of the dance hall. Three horses were tethered there, saddled ready to go. She chose one at random, brought her spurs down sharply against his sides, and headed out the sandy road.

DUSK had fallen, and the night promised to be clear and cloudless. Stars were already studding the heliotrope of the sky with brilliance. Sue leaned low over the saddle, her mind was intent on just one thing—reaching the Circle J in time to help Flash Williams save Slim Jackson. Or was it to save Flash that she was dashing through the night? Those ominous words of message were constantly before Sue's eyes. "If you can't, say so-long to the folks for me." She *must* get there in time to save Flash.

At her right was a steep hill—Lasso Point they had called it, she remembered. How strange to be coming home to her own ranch under these circumstances. Around the base of the point the trail curved sharply. She slowed her horse down and progressed as quietly as she could, discarding after brief consideration the idea of leaving her mount and going forward on foot. Directly ahead lay the ranch house, Sue's old home, its rambling hulk rising nebulous in the glare of the moonlight. Everything seemed deserted. Not a sound could be heard; nothing stirred anywhere. That was strange, Sue thought to herself. The message from Flash had undoubtedly said to come to the Circle J. Where was he? Where was Slim? Where were the people who were menacing Slim's life?

At the veranda steps the girl swung herself from the saddle and walked cautiously toward the house. Still there was no sound except the light tip-tap of her high-heeled boots on the rock walk. She mounted the steps, crossed the porch carefully toward the door. Even in the turmoil of emotion which assailed her in the uncertainty of the moment she could not restrain a quick glance around at the familiar surroundings. The dilapidation of the place appalled her. The porch was sagging, the veranda rail broken in a dozen places, the floor rough and jagged from missing planks. How different it all was from the last time she had crossed this same threshold. But this was no time for sorrowful reminiscence.

At the door Sue paused to listen. She thought she could hear a faint creak inside, as if a heavy boot had struck a loose board. But she could not be sure. Slowly she turned the door knob; the door was unlatched, and it swung open noiselessly under her light touch. All was dark within.

Sue hesitated but a second. Flash had said to come to the Circle J ranch house. Doubtless he would be waiting for her inside. She crossed the threshold cautiously. At once a heavy scratchy something fell over her head; heavy hands seized her arms and bound them tightly to her. She struggled uselessly; a hard hand pressed over her mouth kept back the screams which rose to her lips.

Ruthlessly, while her taut body twitched with attempted resistance, she felt herself half carried, half dragged down a hallway which seemed of interminable length. Then she heard the latch of a door click; she was tossed unceremoniously away from the hands which had held her, and there was the sharp thud of a lock being turned fiercely behind her.

Stunned at first by the suddenness of the attack against her, Sue sat huddled in the corner where she had been thrown. Then as her benumbed

mind began to function again, her hands fluttered upward and dragged forcefully at the heavy sack which had been thrust over her head. She was not bound. Her hands and feet were free; even the sack had not been secured about her.

With the realization that she was at bodily liberty, Sue's mind began to function. She seized the sack with nerveless fingers and jerked it from her head. The lethargy caused by fear which had overcome her when she was seized at the doorway left her, and she rose to her feet to examine her surroundings. The room in which she found herself was small and dark. For a second her eyes could not accustom themselves to the darkness. Then, from the moonlight which flickered in through a high window, she realized that she had been thrust into the small room which had served as her father's office.

Eagerly Sue looked about her.

"Daddy's office," unconsciously the words rose to her lips. She started as she heard them fall upon the dull silence which surrounded her.

In the faint light she could see that the room had not changed materially in the six years which had elapsed since her last visit here. There in the corner was her father's old desk. She could see that the drawers were pulled out, the lock on the roll top broken. At one end of the compartment inside she dimly discerned a half burned candle and a careless pile of matches.

She lighted the wick hurriedly, and turned again to look about her. The room was dirty, dusty, cobwebs hanging from the ceiling, the chairs all pushed back against one wall.

Sue's feelings at the moment were mingled. The scene brought back to her memories of the kindly man who had dispensed all his business from this little office, the man who had meant more to her than any one else in the world. Confused with memories of him were thoughts of Slim and Flash. Where were they? What had happened to them? Her own journey out here had been a failure, she told herself fiercely.

"Instead of helping Flash, I've just got myself into trouble," the words rose to her lips with a sob. There was just one hope, if Maude got word to Gila in time!

Her eyes rested on the door through which she had been so rudely propelled into the room. That door led into the long hallway which ran like a corridor through the center of the ranch house. To the left was another door, which entered into the dining-room. Sue turned to look at it longingly.

The candle flickered in the faint breeze which came through the one high window. Sue turned toward the desk again, and as she did so, three strange words flashed into her mind. What was it Lingo had said to her? "The third door." Two doors were apparent enough in this tiny office. And then, abruptly, Sue remembered. There was a third door, a little hidden door behind the desk, the door to the safe which no one knew about except herself, her father, and one or two trusted men such as Lingo. She remembered with a flow of sentiment how often her father had chided her for hiding in the passageway and safe which this little door concealed. It had been one of the sports of her childhood to open that hidden door, creep inside, and jump out at her father from under the desk when he entered the room.

But she was too large to creep under the desk now. That had been long ago. Her heart was pounding fiercely with excitement. Her ears were ringing with those last words of Lingo's. She darted to the desk and started tugging at it. It was heavy, and it had not been moved for many years, but finally her efforts were rewarded. With a sudden jerk, she moved the desk a few inches, then

by hard labor managed to scrape it farther along the floor until there was space enough behind it for her to squeeze through.

"If I can only remember—" she was almost praying to herself as she wriggled behind the desk to that hidden spring in the wall. Her fingers thrust out unerringly. Almost unconsciously, while her mind was still worrying the problem, the fingers of her right hand wandered over the dusty paneling until they found a notch in the wall. The thumb and finger of her hand pressed the notch carefully; there was the low click of a spring and a narrow part of the wall gave way.

Her heart gave a leap. This must be what Lingo had meant. There must be something in this old hidden safe of her father's which would throw light on the robbery he had mentioned, something that would help explain the mystery of her father's murder. In the wall before her lay exposed a small closet. Sue wondered fleetingly how she had ever managed even as a child to hide within its confines. But this was no time for reminiscence. She dragged out the small steel file inside and pulled it out into the faintly blurred light of the candle.

CHAPTER IX

Gun-Play Hell!

IN a second she had the contents of the file strewn before her on the floor. She eagerly pounced upon one bundle of papers. There were notes, a carbon copy of a mortgage—even in that one fleeting instant she noted that Lingo had been one of its witnesses—letters in her father's fine handwriting, addressed to Ace. She had but a moment to scan them before the door to the corridor opened and some one entered the office-room.

"Here, what you doin' anyway?"

Sue scrambled to her feet, whirled about, and found herself staring into the red scowling face of Bart Henley. She barely had time to slip the papers into the bosom of her dress when his long arm reached out and dragged her away from the safe door.

At sight of the man a wave of repulsion swept over Sue. She flung her head back and looked up squarely into his eyes.

"So," she said, "Mr. Bart Henley is at last showing his hand, is he? I suppose you think you can convince me that I was mistaken about your being the man I saw at the stage holdup."

The man evidently underwent some inward struggle at her words. His heavy frown gave way to a weak and sickly smirk; he released his hold on her arm and stepped back.

"I know I can convince you," he said, and Sue read a double meaning in his words. "My reputation in these here parts ain't to be ruined by the statement of one lone girl. You must have been so excited at the holdup that you didn't know what you saw. Besides, mam, I got plenty of people can swear I was miles away from Arrowhead at the time all that happened. I reckon you was just mistaken, mam."

Sue smiled. She thought she could detect the saying of a part, as if Bart had been coached in what he was to repeat. She found herself wondering, fleetingly, just who had made up that speech for him. Scorn for the man before her made her suddenly unwise.

"Perhaps you're right," she drawled almost insolently. "I might have made a mistake, Mr. George Russel."

Her words took him completely off his guard. He had been standing with eyes downcast, his interpretation of a man unjustly accused. At the sudden use of the name he had hoped never to hear again, his entire demeanor changed. His eyes narrowed to slits as they had done that time in Ace's office. His face contorted into a vicious snarl that brought the fear of terrible violence to Sue's soul. Her

hand darted into her bosom toward her gun, but Bart moved too quickly for her.

His hand, darting with the swift strike of a snake, gripped hers; his face come close, his hot labored breath beating into her face. Leering over her there, he looked like a heavy, loathsome toad. Sue read in his eyes an intention that brought a scream to her lips—a scream that was silenced by his heavy palm almost before it started.

"So," he snarled. "You're some kind of a spy, eh? Well, this ain't no place fer you. You're never goin' out of here alive to tell anything you know. And before I kill you I'm goin' to make you wish you'd never lived."

Sue struggled frantically, her body suddenly steeled to its full strength. But her weak force was useless against the power of the man who held her in his grasp. She was slowly bent back, onto her knees. His intentions were all too evident. Her heart seemed to be filling her throat; her breath came slowly, painfully, as she struggled desperately to reach her gun, more now to turn it on herself.

Bart's clutch was one of iron; Sue was straining every muscle, hopelessly, she realized. Then—

"What's goin' on here?" she heard a voice behind them say.

Bart's grip relaxed and he rose slowly to his feet. Steve Bennett was standing in the doorway. The pleasant look that was his most obvious characteristic seemed to be gone permanently from his face; his mouth was set in a firm hard line, and his eyes were sparks of steel glaring at Bart. Sue had never been so thankful to see any one before. The fact that he was a self-condemned outlaw by his very presence in this place didn't change the fact that he had saved her, temporarily at least.

"What's goin' on?" he repeated.

Bart was crouching, ready to use his guns. As he released his hold on Sue, her own hand slipped to the butt of her thirty-two-twenty.

"Get out," Bart said to Steve, his words barely skinning over his thick lips. "I'm boss here until the big boss comes. Get out."

Steve shook his head, ever so slightly.

"You're not boss here. The real boss is coming in a few minutes."

"I don't care. I'm boss till he gets here. Get out." Bart fairly shouted the words now. "You think you got some kind of a drag, eh? The boss ain't never seen you, an' what I say goes. If you don't make yourself scarce I'll shoot daylight through you before he comes. *Sabe?*"

Steve took one step forward and crouched low. The two men watched each other's every move, each twitch of the nerves. They were close enough together now almost to touch one another. The outcome of a battle would rely entirely upon who could draw the quickest. Suddenly their hands jerked for their guns.

To Sue's terrified eyes it seemed that both men drew and fired at the same time. Their hands moved so quickly that she scarcely saw them start. There was a blurred movement; then guns were spouting smoke and flame. Instinctively she threw herself to one side on the floor to be out of line, and when she looked again both men were still shooting. But Bart's guns were pointed down and his bullets were tearing through the rough pine floor. He was crumpling forward, dead on his feet, but instinct kept him shooting. The candle had been blown out by the concussion of the shots in the small room.

Faintly Sue could see Steve standing as he had been when the shooting began—feet well apart, both guns held low, smoke slowly spiraling from their black muzzles. His eyes were on Bart's guns now, and as one of them wavered up, he threw another shot into the huge body in front of

him. Bart went down, limply, and lay still.

"I guess that'll hold him," Steve turned toward Sue, then swerved sharply around to face the door.

There was the sound of running feet coming down the hall.

SUE was still staring transfixed at the fallen form of the Bar B foreman when a crowd of excited men burst into the room. The first to enter, a tall, lean-jawed puncher, carried two lanterns. At the sight on the floor he stopped abruptly, carefully deposited his lights, and turned to the others who were crowding in, open-mouthed, wondering.

Steve had assumed his old position —guns low, the weight of his body balancing lightly on the balls of both feet. Without aiming directly at the men who had entered, he seemed ready to shift his weapons so as to have them under the muzzles in the fraction of a split second.

"What happened?" the lean-jawed puncher demanded gruffly of Steve.

The men shifted uneasily as he delayed his answer. They hardly knew whether his attitude was hostile to them or whether he was still gripped by the spell of the battle just finished.

A small stocky puncher seemed to be the first to decide. He sidled out from behind the crowd, and with a glad leap of her heart, Sue recognized him as the man who had slipped her the warning note that morning under Ace's eyes. He at least was on her side. She watched him intently as he eased himself gently along the wall, his hands close to his guns, eyes watching Steve's every move. Sue wanted to cry out, to tell him not to shoot Steve after what he had just done for her. Then Steve spoke.

"Tex," he said, addressing the tall lean-jawed puncher who seemed to lead the crowd, "Me and Bart here had an argument. It was personal, nothing to do with our work. But if any of you fellows wants to make it your business, now is the time to do it."

There was another silence at this bold challenge. Sue could hear the men's heavy breathing as they waited for Tex's reply. She saw the short puncher going into the familiar half crouch of the gunman about to explode into action, and she put her hand to her mouth to stifle the cries that rose there. Any second she expected to see the room burst into a storm of shots, but abruptly the tension relaxed.

"Reckon we ain't interested," Tex had said. "This here will be between you and the big boss to settle. An' the boss put a lot of store by Bart," he added ominously.

Some one laughed shortly in relief, as if glad a crisis had been averted. The short puncher relaxed his tension, Steve stepped back a space, and the men surged forward to look at Bart. They were callous in their actions, it seemed to the girl looking on, interested only in seeing just how he had been snuffed out. One of them rolled the dead man over, and then whistled in amazed surprise.

"See here, Steve," Tex turned with suspicion in his eyes. "Was it an even break?"

"An even break," Steve affirmed. "We both reached for our guns at the same time."

Tex shook his head unbelievingly and looked down once more at the prostrate body.

"I never thought to meet a fellah could draw even with Bart Henley an' get two shots in his heart without bein' touched himself," he said slowly, as if weighing this phenomenon in a puzzled mind. "You're sure a flash with them guns, Steve, an' I hope you an' me is always on the same side."

Sue started at the man's words. "A flash with them guns." A slow suspicion settled in her befuddled mind. She looked intently at Steve, trying

to get some sort of signal from his eyes, but he was busy reloading the chambers of his two weapons and seemed not to notice her. The little puncher she had been watching, now leaned indifferently against the wall, his eyes on the toes of his boots. He seemed to have lost interest in the whole affair.

"Well," Tex said, "ain't nothin' to do but wait fer the boss now." Then his eyes fell on Sue and he gave a start of surprise.

"She here already? Thought the boss was bringin' her. Danged if I hadn't most fergot all about the female. And she's seen every one of us. What we ought to do, Steve?"

Steve's eyes met Sue's squarely, their blue depths devoid of any expression whatever. There was no way for her to tell what he was thinking.

"Whatever you say, Tex," he answered with a shrug. "I suppose you'll have to keep her out with the other two. Better let the boss decide now that Bart ain't givin' no more orders."

Sue started. What "other two?" Could that mean Slim, and Blondie? Of course it must. Again she searched Steve's face, but could learn nothing from it. Which side was this man on, anyway? For a second, when Tex had inadvertently used that word "flash" she had thought—but now—well, it was hard to tell.

"All right," Tex answered Steve, quite evidently relieved at the younger man's ready recognition of his own leadership. "Two of you fellahs carry Bart out into the front room. Shorty, you go get the sheriff and that kid Steve brung in. Steve, reckon you better stay here with the girl. We'll have 'em all in the big dinin' room when the boss comes."

The men got busy as directed and almost at once Tex, Steve and the girl were left alone. Tex looked from Steve to Sue and shook his head.

"This kind of business don't suit me at all," he said. "It was all right downin' the sheriff, but I don't *sabe* how this girl come to be here, even if she is Crawford's daughter. She don't know nothin'. And why you brung that blond kid down beats me, too."

"How was I to know he wasn't in on our deal?" Steve defended himself. "Bart never would tell me who all the boys were. And this kid was in jail with that crazy Gila and his punchers goin' to string him up. Looks like to me if he wasn't one of our gang he ought to be. How'd I know he'd be too obstinate to throw in with us?"

Tex shook his head.

"All I can say is, he's a fool. We'll have to fix him like——" he caught Sue's intent eye and looked away. "I don't like it," he repeated. "I was agin Bart sendin' Buck out this mornin' to do thet job"—Sue thought she detected a slight motion of the man's head toward her—"an' I'm agin any more business like it. We ain't out just to kill people. I'm fer splittin' soon as the boss gets this money he's been talkin' about an' makin' our getaway."

"Did the boss know Bart sent Buck out?" Steve asked quickly.

"I dunno." Tex's answer was gloomy. "Bart come back swearin'. Some one got Buck in the back 'fore he finished what Bart sent him out after. An' then 'fore Bart could do more'n cover up who Buck was, a bunch of horsemen come afoggin' up the mesa, an' Bart had to light out."

"Who got the sheriff?" Steve continued the inquisition, and Sue thought his eyes shifted in her direction for a brief second. The idea crossed her mind that Steve was questioning Tex for her benefit; certainly things were beginning to be cleared up in her mind. Buck was evidently the person who had been shooting at her, under Bart's order.

"Don't do no good to talk so much," Tex said, with a significant look in Sue's direction. "The sheriff come on

some of our men a little too sudden. The same bunch that run Bart off from Buck was too close fer them to finish Jackson right there, so they brung him in. An' there ain't no good comin' of it. I say again it's time fer us to divvy up an' make ourselves scarce."

"How about the big deal Bart told us the boss was goin' to pull off? Would you pull freight before that was put over?" Steve asked.

"Well, money's money, but I reckon the boss'd get most of this haul. An' say, we're gettin' too gabby." Tex turned toward the door abruptly. "You bring the girl into the dinin' room an' ride herd on her. If she gets away, it's up to you."

CHAPTER XI

Flash!

AS TEX left the room Sue rose and crossed over to Steve. She stood there silent, searching his eyes. Everything seemed plain to her now, she was chagrined to think that she had not suspected before who this man in front of her was. It had taken the outlaw Tex's words "a flash with them guns," and Steve's subsequent interrogation, to open her mind. Here before her was the only man of all she had seen, brave enough, clean enough, all around man enough to be the association's best detective. Why hadn't she known before?

"Steve," the words were barely audible to him. "Steve, I bet I've got your number."

For a long second the man stared at her bleakly, then a little spark of merriment began dancing far back in his eye, increasing in size until suddenly his face broke into a sheepish grin.

"I wouldn't be surprised, mam," he retorted. "You had it the first time we ever met, far as I was concerned."

Sue blushed under his steady gaze, but her eyes never faltered. Whatever Steve read in them made his own eyes soft and tender. His hands half reached out to her; then he drew back, and his face asumed the bantering look that was habitual with him.

"Reckon I can call your number, too," he said lightly. "Unless I'm mistaken, it's twenty."

"And you are——?"

"Thirty-two."

"Oh, Flash," cried Sue. "Why didn't you tell me at first? I've been thinking such awful things about you. I thought you tried to shoot me from the mesa that time, and it was this man Buck, wasn't it? Did you—did you kill him?"

"Yes, Sue, I had to, or he'd have got you sure. But he and Bart are the only ones so far."

"The only ones?" The holdup scene flashed before her mind, and she could see a masked outlaw tumbling in the dust. "Weren't you the one that shot the outlaw at the stage holdup?"

"No'm. That was Shorty Coons, the fellow that gave you the note at Ace's ranch. He's my partner. We sure were worried about you that time. And still are, for that matter. Listen."

They both stood silent, straining every faculty. There was a drone of voices in the building, and a few casual footsteps in other rooms, but nothing else. Steve shook his head.

"Thought I heard horses," he said. "I've got to get you out of here before the big shot comes. I'm not just sure who he is yet, but we're bound to have a showdown to-night and you've got to get away before it comes."

"I won't leave," she told him defiantly. "I belong here with you."

Steve shook his head, but his eyes as he looked at her were tender.

"You belong with me all right," he said. "But not here. You don't *sabe* how desperate this gang is, Sue. They've got a big deal on. The boss is on the trail of a lot of money from somewhere or other. The gang isn't

helping him get it, but they're to decide to-night just how much he's to give them of it for their past services. I'm going to slip you out somehow. Jackson is hurt, but he can still shoot. Shorty's going to slip him and Blondie each a gun. That's why I brought Maude's beau here—makes the odds more even. If we get the jump we may get away with it. There's a lot of these outlaws, though."

"Gila's on his way out here," she told Steve, "And," she added the words flatly, "I'm not going to leave."

Steve, or rather Flash, reached out and drew her close to him, his hands gripping her slender shoulders.

"You'll take orders from me," he said softly, his eyes looking deep into hers. "I'm the senior member of the association and what I say goes."

"I'm working under separate orders," she flared up. "Nobody's giving me orders. I'm going to stay with you."

"You'll stay with me forever after," Flash told her, his clasp on her shoulders tightening. "But now——"

Outside they heard the thunder of horses' hoofs. There was the shouting of men's voices, and a stampede on the ranch-house porch.

"Too late," Flash groaned. "There's the boss."

The big dining room was filling with men when Flash led Sue in. With a relieved start she recognized Ace. Now that he was here, she told herself, everything would surely be all right. Behind him, clustered in a tight compact group were a number of punchers from the Bar B. Over by the doorway she saw Gila and the men he had taken with him to find Bart Henley.

The fear which had been smouldering within Sue ever since Bart had come into the office diminished. With all these men to be on the right side, she was sure that the few outlaws now at the Circle J wouldn't have a chance. She started to cross the room to Ace's side, but just then Maude burst from the throng of the Box A punchers and came rushing up to Sue.

"Oh, Sue, I'm so glad we got here in time. I found Gila at the Bar B, so Ace just rounded up his punchers and they came right along with us."

There was an uneasy rustle among the Bar B men at Maude's words, but Ace quieted them with a motion of his hand and spoke to Sue.

"Yes, young lady," he said with mock severity. "My men want to what you mean by spreading all over the country that my foreman is an outlaw? I thought you and I were going to settle that between us, and then along comes Gila threatening to string Bart up."

Before she could answer. Flash stepped forward, his voice grave as he spoke.

"The matter has already been settled, Ace. Bart is dead."

"Dead?" Sue tried to decipher the expression which crossed Ace's face at Flash's words. It looked like a tremor of relief, thankfulness almost, but she felt that she must be mistaken. As much as Ace thought of his foreman, he couldn't be relieved at news of the man's death, surely.

"Bart dead? Who beefed him?" Gila demanded, stepping forward into the circle belligerently.

"I did," Flash looked calmly into the Box A foreman's eyes as he spoke.

"Well, dang me if you ain't the most contrary cuss I ever met up with," spluttered Gila. "One time yo're hollerin' fer law an' order an' the next yo're slingin' lead around promiscuous like. I——" He stopped short, and his large eyes fairly popped open in astonishment as he stared at the door leading out into the side porch. "Where did you hombres spring from?"

HIS surprised question was occasioned by the entry of three men from the porch. Blonde was in the

lead, his eyes on Gila and his punchers. Sue guessed that the hand inside his vest held the gun Flash said Shorty was going to give him. Behind Blondie came Slim Jackson. The sheriff had his left arm bound to his body in a rude sling. He was pale and wan, but seemed able to keep his feet. Shorty Coons brought up the rear.

There was an astonished gasp from the whole crowd. Every one began asking questions at once, and Maude gave a little frightened cry and darted forward.

"Blondie—Oh, Slim," she cried, "are you badly hurt?"

"I'm all right," Slim answered her brusquely, patting her gently once or twice on the head, and then pushing her aside. "You keep away from here, Maude."

"Looka here, sheriff," Gila said contentiously. "What all's been goin' on around here?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Slim's voice was grim. "I was shot out of my saddle up on the mesa, and when I come to I'd been dragged to some one of the buildings on this place, an' Blondie here was tyin' up my wounds. Blondie swears he don't belong to this gang. Says Steve there brought him out because you was goin' to lynch him."

"Well, we was," acknowledged Gila slowly. "An' I ain't so sure we was far offen the trail in doin' it, neither."

"Yeah?" Blondie half withdrew his right hand until every one could see the butt of a six shooter. "Maybe you wouldn't be so anxious to see me if you knew I was heeled."

At sight of the gun the man called Tex started in surprise. For a second, too, it looked as if Gila would take exception to Blondie's sneering remark. Then Maude broke the strained silence.

"But, Blondie," she cried. "They found some masks and things under your bunk that they said proved you were one of the gang that held up the stage. Gila thought you and Lon Gray must be buddies."

From the blank look on Blondie's face, Sue knew that this was the first time he had heard of those things under his bunk. Slim verified her belief immediately.

"Blondie didn't have anything to do with that," he broke in. "I put those things there myself.

"What?" the question was jerked from half a dozen men at once. Sue found her head beginning to swim under the pile of contradictory evidence that was amassing itself.

"Yes," the sheriff continued, coolly. "I took them off of Lon Gray this mornin'. When Steve and I come by the Box A on our way back I cached them away to keep from havin' to tote them all over the country. I stuck them in Blondie's war bag to get later."

Gila and the Box A cowboys looked a trifle sheepish. They realized how close they had come to making Blondie pay with his life for a hasty deduction on their part. But Gila still looked steadily at Blondie.

"I guess maybe we was some hasty, Blondie, but we still holds you responsible fer Lingo's passin' out."

It was Flash's turn to throw a bombshell into the assembly.

"We can easily free Blondie of that charge, Gila. He didn't shoot Lingo."

"No?" Gila turned hostile eyes upon the association's crack detective. "Who done it then?"

"Bart Henley."

"You lie." Ace stepped forward angrily. "Why should Bart want to kill poor old Lingo? If Bart isn't here to defend himself any longer, I'm here to do it for him."

"Wait," Sue held out a detaining hand toward the old man. "You're pleading a poor cause, Ace. Bart must have fooled you all along. Bart Henley that you trusted so much was really George Russel. He's been wanted for a long time."

As Sue finished she felt that her disclosure did not come as a great surprise to some of those present. Gila and his men seemed taken back enough, but Flash only smiled at her quizzically, admiringly. And she saw the man Tex's eyes narrow to bright pin points, speculatively. Others of Ace's punchers looked at her more in consternation than in wonder.

Ace himself was speechless, but mostly from anger, Sue decided. His eagle eyes glowed, black pools of biting rage.

"Anyway," Flash went on smoothly, "Bart Henley, or Russel, or whatever he's called, killed Lingo. Shorty there and me saw him do it."

"You saw him do it?" Gila cried incredulously, his quick temper rising dangerously again. "Why didn't you stop him from gettin' away then?"

"Because," Flash's manner was still cool and deliberate. "Because we had to help him get away."

For a moment there was a dumfounded silence. Then Gila exploded.

"Well damned if shootin' ain't too good fer you. Squint, get us yore rope. Get two. We'll put thet Shorty runt up with him."

There was a slow movement among the Bar B men. They were not fully certain of Flash's intentions. He had been one of them. Why was he openly declaring himself before Gila and the others? Was he a traitor or was he carried away with the outlaw's contempt for law and order? They missed Bart and his leadership. One at a time they shifted over behind Ace, where they presented a solid wall, waiting for action.

Among them Sue noticed all those outlaws who had entered the office after Flash had killed Bart—outlaws, elbow to elbow, on evident friendly terms, with Ace's punchers. A slow and terrible premonition began to settle over her.

"Wait," Slim's voice, a volume of command, snapped her mind back to the question at hand. He backed his command with a long gun which appeared suddenly, convincingly, in his one good hand. "I'm the law here an' Steve in my deputy. We'll hear what he has to say for himself before any one makes a move. Speak up, Steve. Tell 'em what you got to say."

CHAPTER XII

Trail's End

FLASH took a step forward, not so much to talk as to have elbow room. Sue saw that although he was going to speak to the whole crowd, his eyes were on Ace.

"You can quite calling me Steve. I used that name when I came here and tried to get in with the bunch of cattle rustlers that have been operating in this territory. I soon found out Bart Henley was straw-bossing the crowd; he took me and Shorty in finally. We could have taken Bart any time, but we were after the fellow he worked for and we couldn't ever find out who it was. Last night at the dance Bart come to the doorway just in time to hear Miss Crawford say she'd know who the holdup man was if she ever saw him again. Well, Bart got out quick, so me and Shorty eased out to look for him between dances. We saw him shoot Lingo, but we couldn't find out why he did it."

"But I know," Sue interposed. "Bart killed Lingo because he heard him telling me that I had been robbed through the murder of my father."

No one seemed surprised by her resounding announcement. Again she had a terrible premonition that the entire Bar B group knew all about this, also.

"Anyway," Flash went on smoothly, "We helped Bart get away after the killing because we were after the man higher up. The fellow directing the rustling, the holdups, and the murders. The man who gave Bart his orders."

The outlaws knew Flash for what he was now. Their eyes smoldered angrily, each hand itching for the chance to send a bullet to silence him.

"And who are you?" demanded Ace, stepping forward.

He stood there, hands in the pockets of his old leather coat, the picture of angry dignity, the outraged citizen, the successful cattleman, frowning down upon this upstart drifter. Fanned out behind him stood his punchers and the men who had been at the ranch when Sue had been so unceremoniously thrown into her father's office.

Gila looked uncertain, as though he had struggled beyond his depth and was turning questions over in his mind. His punchers, too, looked puzzled at the strange behavior of these Bar B men, fellows they had known only on friendly terms. But it was easy to sense an open hostility. Slowly Gila's men gathered into a united group behind their foreman, watchful, eager.

Sue, Flash, Maude, Blondie and the sheriff stood in still another compact group. Of all those present, Shorty was the only one left alone. He shifted slowly backward until he was in one corner. From that vantage point the entire room and its occupants were under his observation.

"So you want to know who I am?" Flash was demanding of Ace.

"Yes," snapped the old cattle king angrily. "And you better have some proof of your accusations against Bart, or me and my punchers are going to revenge him right now."

The slow tantalizing smile was back on Flash's face as he looked over the men with whom he had been associating the past weeks.

"Well," he said slowly, "some folks, like Tex there, call me Flash. My name is really Williams, and I work for the Cattlemen's Association with—"

"Look out," screamed Sue, jerking desperately at her gun. At Flash's words she had seen Tex's quick hand jump to the holster on his thigh. Her warning would not have been in time, but it was unnecessary, anyway. A gun boomed heavily, and Tex whirled back against the wall, one arm hanging limp.

"Steady," it was Shorty Coons speaking now, a forty-five in each hand, wary, alert. "Keep them guns down, you fellers. The next man tries anything gits it between the eyes."

The light glittered harshly on guns everywhere, drawn, half drawn, still in the holsters. Only one more spark was needed to make a shambles of the room. Each man waited, not sure who were enemies and who were friends. They looked from one to another, and gradually all eyes centered on Ace. He stood staring down at his feet as though a terrible apparition had suddenly appeared there.

In drawing her weapon, Sue had been in such mad haste that the papers she had stuffed into her bosom had been dragged out. They had fallen to the floor, the cord that held them breaking with the impact. Now they lay scattered between Sue and Ace.

Slowly Ace's eyes came up and met the girl's in a hard, angry gaze. She read consternation in them first; then they hardened with determination and deadly hatred. In the passing of a second the face of the man before her had changed from the smiling countenance of the man she had known as her father's best friend to the lined and crafty face of an archfiend.

While the man still glared at her, Sue stooped hurriedly and picked up the paper nearest her. It was a receipt, creased and yellowed, but still legible. In one glance the girl understood its full import.

"Received of John Crawford the sum of six thousand dollars ($6,000) in full payment of promissory note attached to the mortgage on the Circle J ranch."

The signature was Ace's.

In a flash the realization of what this slip of paper meant swept over Sue. It meant that the Circle J was hers. It meant that the cattle Ace Cassiter was going to borrow money on were hers, also. And it could mean only one other thing. That Ace—

"You," he was mouthing at her, his very voice seeming to have undergone a transformation. The room was deadly silent, tense, waiting for his words. "Where did you get those papers?"

Sue stood as if paralyzed, her mind engulfed with the terrific realization of what all this meant.

"They were in my father's safe," she said slowly. "The hidden safe that nobody knew about, except Lingo and me. Not even you knew of it. You, his best—his best—*friend.*" The last word came with a bitter, almost hysterical laugh. "You," her finger came up accusingly. "You kill—killed—oh," and she hid her face in her hands, overcome with the horror that her father's murderer stood before her.

"And so," Flash's voice broke in, cool, hard, his words like the lash of a white flame. "We were looking for the leader, and, by God, we've found him."

The full impact of the sudden exposure left them all stunned. No one moved, nothing was heard but a sob from Sue as her mind flew to her father, murdered by the man he had befriended and trusted.

Ace stood as if turned to stone. Not a muscle moved, not an eyelash flickered. Perhaps now for the first time he realized the enormity of the crime he had committed.

"Ace," said Flash, taking a step forward, "I arrest—"

Frame and smoke burst suddenly from Ace's pockets. All the while he had been standing there his hands had held two concealed derringers and now he turned them upon Flash at point-blank range.

The heavy slugs hit Flash, and hit him hard. He spun halfway around and went down to his knees, but he was still the instinctive gunman. Even as he fell, his arms described lightning arcs and his own weapons spouted stabs of flame. Shorty was firing too. Sue saw Ace take a step toward her, then a small round hole appeared suddenly in his forehead, and he crashed face down beside Flash.

Shorty's guns thundered venomously, but a dozen outlaws were pouring lead at him now. Sue saw one man sway, his hands sinking slowly. Another slid lingeringly to the floor.

Blondie pushed Maude behind him to shield her with his own body. He threw his shots at the Bar B men with greater haste than accuracy. His mind was more intent upon protecting Maude than upon killing others. But Slim was more deliberate. He had been hit again, but his eyes glowed steadily over the barrel of his forty-five and each man he sighted on went down. Sue could not think to shoot. She flung herself to her knees to support Flash. In so doing she unconsciously exposed herself to the worst fire of all, for the outlaws were determined that the detective should not live. And none of them would have lived had it not been for Gila and his Box A cow hands.

"Get goin'," Gila bellowed suddenly, and suited his actions to the words.

A SUDDEN storm of lead from the flank raked the outlaws. Bullets ricocheted in all directions from the walls of the big room; there was a continuous roaring of six-guns, mingled with the curses and moans of men. The air was full of smoke and dust, blinding, stinging. A bullet missed its mark and shattered one of the tall windows, making its glass fall in a jangling clatter. Then some one shot out the lanterns and nothing

could be seen in the flash of guns except a sprawl of shifting targets. There was a sudden stampede for the doors.

"Flash," Sue tugged desperately at the limp form beside her. "Flash, are you dead?"

There was no answer.

Sue paid no more attention to the shots and yells outside, to the biting sounds of the fight in progress. She did not even hear them now, or wonder what the outcome would be, as she knelt there by the side of Flash Williams. He was still alive, she could tell that, but in the darkness that enveloped the room she could not ascertain the extent of his injuries.

In a far corner she could see the faint outline of the figure of a girl, still crouching behind the table where Blondie Carter had thrust her.

"Maude, quick," Sue called frantically. "Get a light."

As if regaining a lingering consciousness, the figure stirred, rose, then as Sue's meaning flashed upon her, Maude began searching the muddled floor for a lantern. Finally she succeeded in finding the stubby end of a candle which she lighted. Sue took it from her silently and knelt again by Flash's side. He was crumpled in a loose heap, his head hanging against his blood-soaked chest.

Sue tore his shirt swiftly from his shoulder.

Maude helped her, and with the deftness of an expert, she plugged and bound the bullet hole.

And then, faintly outlined in the doorway, a figure appeared, tall, dark, shapeless. There was no way of telling yet whether this was friend or foe. Again Sue's gun came fort! to rest nervelessly in a taut hand.

Then Slim's voice spoke, and both girls sank back, relieved, exhausted with the suspense of that long moment.

"You all right, girls?"

Maude ran to her brother's side. "Slim, where's Blondie?" Her voice seemed to choke on the words.

"He's all right, Maude." Slim's words came reassuringly. "He'll be along in a minute. You wait here."

But Maude could not wait. She darted past Slim's restraining hand out onto the veranda.

"You all right, Miss Crawford?" Slim crossed toward Sue.

"Yes, but Flash——" the words seemed to die on her lips. Even as she spoke, the limp figure beside her stirred. In the pale light of the candle she saw Flash's eyelids rise, and his bold mocking glance smiled up at her.

"I'm all right, girl," the words came hardly above a whisper, but his clasp on her hand tightened possessively.

"Good physique, that fellow; hard to kill."

Sue looked up at Slim as he spoke.

"Is everything settled—out there?" she nodded her head briefly toward the door.

Slim nodded.

"The gang's wiped out," he told her. "Wiped out or captured, every one of them. I reckon law'll take care of Arrowhead now."

Shuddering, Sue looked at the figure of Ace, crumpled there so desolately on the dusty floor of her father's house.

"Did you know about—him?"

"I suspected," Slim spoke slowly, and in Flash's eyes Sue saw confirmation of what Slim said. "What Williams here said was true. Ace was the boss, all right. Don't know how he fooled everybody the way he did. Tex told us some about it out there, just now. Tex isn't hurt, and he's ready to talk all we want, I guess.

"You see, Ace was smart. That's where he got along so well. No money really changed hands between him and your Dad. Crawford just signed mortgages over to Ace so's he could borrow real money on 'em. Act of

friendship, sort of, because the Bar B was in a hard way. Your father protected himself, or he thought he did, by gettin' a cash receipt in advance. Then when Ace got in too deep ever to get out again he got the idea to do away with your father and let the mortgages stand. He'd have gotten away with it, too, if you hadn't found that receipt. I don't suppose he ever thought about Lingo, until Bart caught onto him last night, or Lingo'd been gone before he was."

Sue nodded her understanding of Slim's explanation. Then she shook her head distastefully. She didn't want to think of it any more.

"And this loan Ace was trying to get," Flash took up the story, his voice weak. "He was meaning to get away with that, too—leave the country, out of danger. That's why we had to close everything up right away." He tried to raise himself up on one elbow, but Sue pushed him back gently until his head rested in her lap again.

"I reckon everything's settled now," he went on, looking up into the girl's face leaning above him, "everything except about—you and me."

Sue opened her lips to speak, but before she could answer Maude and Blondie came in through the doorway, followed at a discreet distance by Gila.

"How's Steve?" Blondie began. Flash answered for himself.

"I'm feelin' fine," he said, grinning at the blond boy towering above him. "Never had so much attention before. But you and Gila here sure caused me a heap of trouble this afternoon."

Gila smiled sheepishly. Maude's free arm reached out toward him.

"Come here," she demanded. "I reckon we're all going to be friends from now on. Aren't you happy, Sue?" Maude's own voice was vibrant with happiness as she spoke.

"Yes, I'm happy," Sue answered, looking into Flash's questioning eyes. "Or I will be, when you're well again."

Flash laughed. It was a rather shaky laugh, low, weak, but it was full of triumph.

"I'm well enough." His voice lowered so that only Sue could hear. "Or I would be, if you'd tell me that you care for me half as much as I do for you."

"I suppose you'll be coming back to the Circle J to live now, Sue," Maude's voice broke in again. "Now that it belongs to you again."

For only a second Sue hesitated.

"No," she said slowly. "I reckon you and Blondie can run the Circle J if you'd like. Flash and I——" she paused.

"We're going to take the trail together," Flash finished the sentence for her. "I reckon from now on I won't have to be lonesome ever again."

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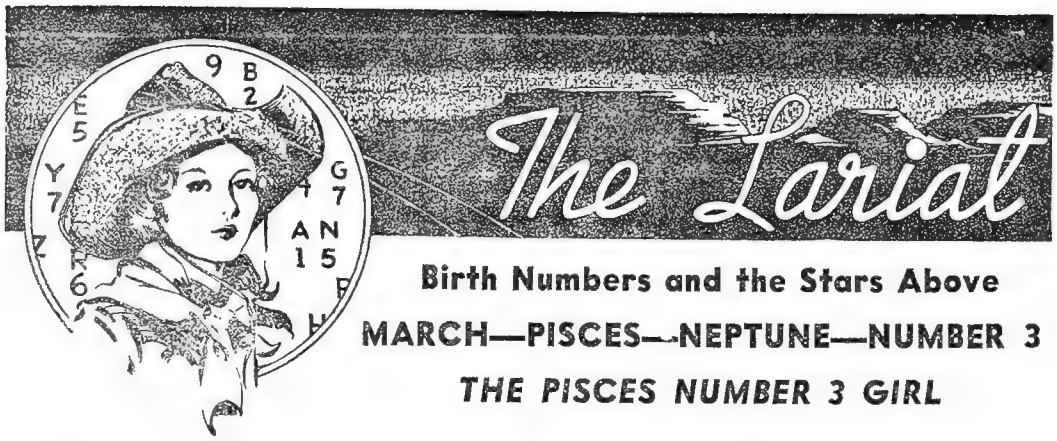

Birth Numbers and the Stars Above

MARCH—PISCES—NEPTUNE—NUMBER 3

THE PISCES NUMBER 3 GIRL

WRITE down a number 3 in longhand. Now hold it on its left side. It looks like a bird flying in the air. It is a true symbol of the Pisces-Number 3 girl—she has many birdlike qualities. She is delicate, loves romance, beauty and nature, has a great imagination and inclined to be timid until aroused.

Pisces runs from February 19th to March 21st; but those born during the first three weeks of March are more imaginative and romantic than those born the last week in February. The other qualities apply to both. The girl born the last week of February might be more practical about love than the March girl.

Love to the Pisces-Number 3 girl is like the glory of the open spaces is to a bird. It is her life. To tell her that romance is not for her—is like telling a bird that it must remain in a cage for the rest of its life.

If you know any Pisces-Number 3 girls, you will notice that they are very neat persons. They are kind to dumb animals and people in distress. They are honest, idealistic and sympathetic. They cannot enjoy life where there is disorder or conflict. Just as a gun scares a bird, so does a harsh word make the Pisces-Number 3 girl suffer. Such a girl's husband who talks unkindly to her, should be horse-whipped.

Because of her sensitive nature, she is a very glamorous girl. It is easy for her to get the center of attraction at a party. She makes an ideal hostess because she can quickly sense the feelings of others and can tell if anything is wrong. Some people say that Pisces-Number 3 is the most psychic of all.

But don't think that because the Pisces-Number 3 girl is delicate and timid, that she can be walked over. Far be it from the truth. Did you ever go into a forest and watch the birds? They may be singing and enjoying nature, but suddenly a squirrel comes too close to a nest, and instantly a war is on. The birds swoop down, chatter vigorously and fly at that squirrel threatening him with having his eyes pecked out if he dares molest that nest.

Yes—never molest the nest of a Pisces-Number 3 girl. Don't try to steal her lover because you might think she will run away and hide. Something explodes inside of her and she becomes a fire of indignation and hate. She will use a subtle method of attacking you.

She is at her best in the open spaces. Give her an estate, a ranch, a farm of her own where love is at her side—and in a short time she has the respect and admiration of all her neighbors. She knows the right thing to do at the right time, and seldom do you ever hear of the Pisces-Number 3 girl not being able to win the love of horses and other animals. Animals sense this inborn sympathy of such a girl.

One thing this Pisces-Number 3 girl must guard against—and that is worry over the troubles of other people. She often takes too many burdens on her own shoulders—and this weakens her and she becomes depressed and fearful. Many people will impose on the good nature of such a girl—and it is to her advantage to know when to call a halt.

Last but not least—she must make sure that the fire of romance that comes her way, is kindled by a lasting fuel—not just brush-wood.

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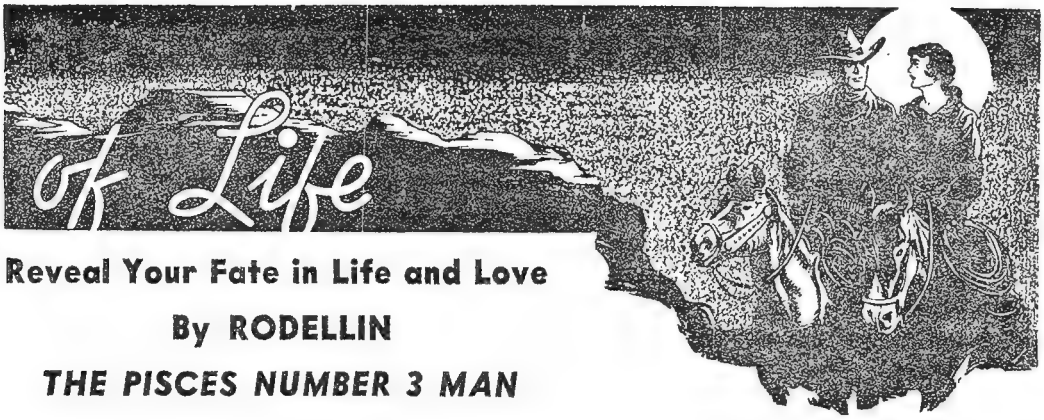

Reveal Your Fate in Life and Love

By RODELLIN

THE PISCES NUMBER 3 MAN

THE Pisces-Number 3 man might be poetic, romantic and artistic—but don't think that he can't ride a wild horse if he has to. He may not go around carrying a chip on his shoulder or his love on his sleeve—but when it comes to a show down, you will find him pulling the trigger and shooting straight to kill.

What if the Pisces-Number 3 man does go out of his way to avoid a quarrel? That doesn't prove that he is weak. What if he doesn't tell the first girl he likes, that he is mad about her, and make love to her passionately! That doesn't mean that he isn't capable of making love and loving, when the proper time comes.

Love means too much to the Pisces-Number 3 man, to shower it recklessly. Because of his strong poetic nature, love means more to him than the average man. You don't find him getting over a love affair as quickly as some. In fact, seldom does a Pisces-Number 3 man who has been disappointed in love, ever completely remove the scar from his heart. Because love has made too deep a cut—and deep cuts take longer to heal.

And it is true, that many a Pisces-Number 3 man becomes disappointed in love. It is usually caused by his failure to demonstrate a wild expression of his feelings. He may have courted a girl for a long time and given her all the fondness he could; and then suddenly some man who carries his love on his sleeve—who makes love like a movie hero in an energetic and passionate way—meets the girl and sweeps her off her feet. And the Pisces-Number 3 fellow is left alone. If he only could have proved his stronger and lasting love, things would have been vastly different than they were.

That is why the girl who goes with a Pisces-Number 3 man, should make every effort to know the man beneath the surface, or give him a test to bring his love into the open in some dramatic manner. And it is wise for him to realize this condition, and make more effort to manifest his love in action as well as thought of poetry. The fellow who sings a sweet song beneath the window of his sweetheart—will not win her as quickly as the lover who climbs the balcony and takes her in his arms, whispering sweet words of romance instead of just singing them.

Like the Pisces-Number 3 girl, the man of that influence is also neat. And he demands neatness in a girl. If you are going with such a fellow, never let him see you in a disorderly condition, unless of course he is saving you from drowning. Seldom do you have to call attention to a Pisces-Number 3 man that he needs a haircut or a shave or his boots need shining. He thinks of those things himself.

The thing he must guard against is lack of self-confidence. That is why it is so important for him to have a good wife—one who can urge him to do big things, who believes in him and will never nag. The girl who tells the Pisces-Number 3 boy that she has great confidence in him and who encourages him in some undertaking so that he too catches her confidence—has made the first step into his heart.

Yes—love to a Pisces-Number 3 man, burns in his heart—it doesn't shine on his sleeve where any girl can touch it. And a girl who can win such a man should consider herself lucky.

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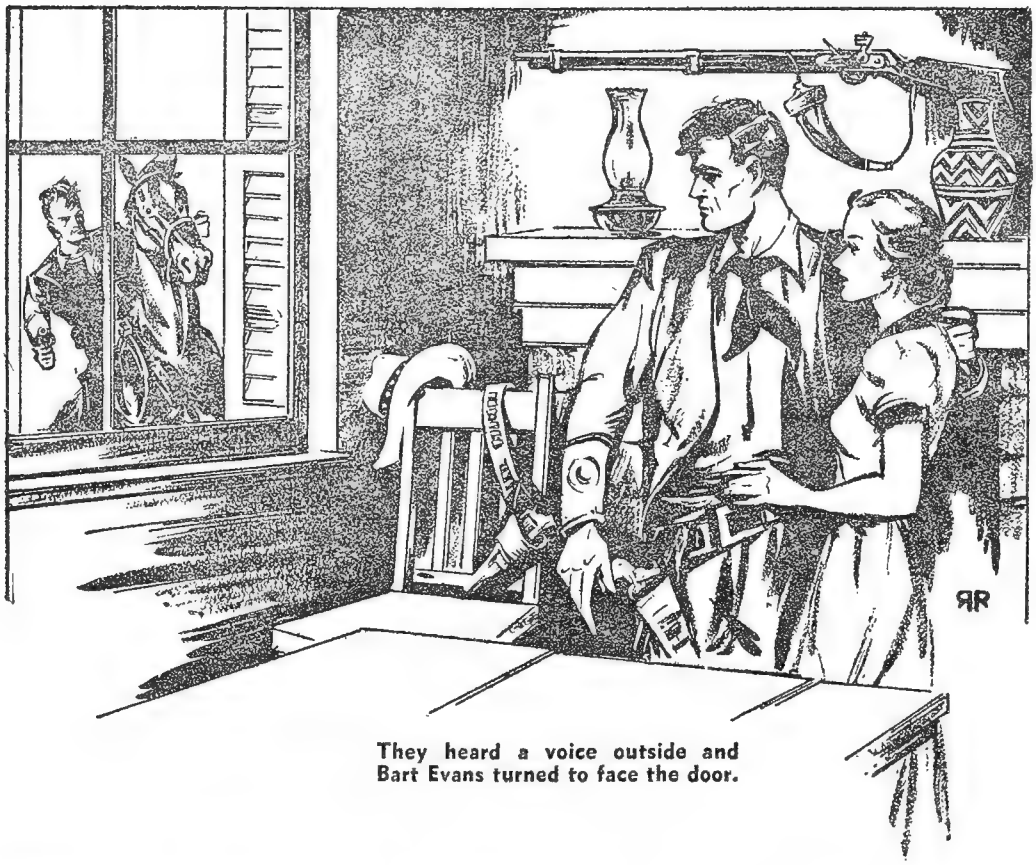

They heard a voice outside and Bart Evans turned to face the door.

The Trail To Nowhere

By Beatrice Jones

Had Tess Logan lost her love as well as her lover somewhere along the dim trail that led to nowhere?

TESS LOGAN stared with weary blue eyes at the waves of heat rising from the sweaty, dusty backs of the two-horse team she was driving.

With a slim, sunburned hand, she thrust a strand of yellow-gold hair back beneath the faded blue percale sunbonnet, keeping a firm hold on the reins with the other hand. She was so tired of dust and heat and endless miles of dreary rangeland; so tired of the nomadic existence she and her father had led ever since she was six when her mother had died.

During the first years, it had been fun to travel from one end of the border to the other, sitting beside her father as he drove the white-covered wagon filled with clanking pans and pots and hardware—the wares he sold from the Panhandle to El Paso to the settlers among whom he was known as Tinker Dan.

It had been fun, too, during those early years, to stop off, camping in wild, desolate spots around the foothills while Tinker prospected for

gold. In those days he had said he was searching for gold so that he might buy a spread and make a home for Tess. That had been his excuse for spending every cent he made from the sale of his merchandise on prospecting equipment and supplies for the long stretches when the covered wagon and its wares stood idle in some canyon.

But her father didn't give that excuse any more. Not since Tess reached the age of fifteen and Tinker let her continue the trek from end to end of the Border, alone, while he devoted all his time to prospecting. After that Tess knew her dad's urge to hunt yellow gold was like a thirst for strong liquor in a confirmed drunkard—something he could no longer resist; something that made him lie to himself and to her.

During the three years since she was fifteen, Tess Logan had sold Tinker Dan's wares, meeting him every three or four months at a designated spot, giving him money to replenish his supplies and equipment, then watching him disappear once again into the foothills, following his gold mirage.

And each time he still said, "I'll hit it rich this time, honey. See ef'en I don't. Then me and you'll settle down and have a place of our own."

But now the words were hollow, meaningless, and Tinker knew it too, for he kept his eyes on the ground and the words rushed out in a hurried drawl.

And during the last three years Tess had dreamed more and more often of the home she wanted so badly. Lately, she had come to the realization that to be completely happy in that home she would need someone besides Tinker Dan to share it with her—someone who would not put her second in his heart after a love of gold. A man whose main interest and love in life would be her.

Tess felt the wild color rushing to her cheeks now. It always did when she started dreaming about love and being married to the vague ideal of a man she had never met. . . .

SHE pulled the team to a walk as they began the climb up the short incline that hid the little town of Malo, Texas. The clatter of tin pans inside the covered wagon dropped to a sleepy tinkle. Tess thrust the blue sunbonnet back off her head, let it hang down her back while the two long streamers tied beneath her chin kept it swinging from her neck. Another ten minutes and she would be in Malo, would see Tinker Dan for the first time in three months.

The wagon breasted the rise and the little town sprang into view, lay wavering in the noonday sunlight before her.

Immediately, Tess noticed the change in the dusty little town. Her eyes went wide with astonishment and a puzzled frown crept between her straight golden brows.

Three months ago Malo had been no more than a crossroads stop, made up of a commissary and a saloon at which cowboys and ranchers from surrounding spreads did their celebrating and shopping.

Now, it was a regular town. She saw rough board signs proclaiming a hotel, a bank and a cafe with the word "EATS" across the front in three foot letters.

Then she saw the sign next door to the bank and she knew what had happened to Malo. The sign read, "Assayer's Office." That would mean gold. Somebody had found gold around Malo and the town had built up for the strike!

Gold!

She thought of Tinker Dan and hope sprang into her heart for the first time in years.

She pulled the team to a halt in front of the assayer's office. If her father had made a strike they would

know about it here. She got down from the wagon, went around to hitch the team to the post.

It was then that she noticed the saloon across the street. Her eyes jerked around to it automatically as the sound of loud voices and the clomp of many feet surged across the street to her. She saw men lurch from between the batwings of the saloon, fill the porch and stomp onto the road. In that glance she saw that they were drunk and that they were not cowboys. They would, she knew, be miners and prospectors. She searched their faces for her father, saw that he was not among the bearded, grimy looking gang.

Then, just as she was turning back to the hitch rack, a voice yelled: "A gal! By God, a woman has come to Malo!" Other voices took up the cry and Tess turned startled eyes to the crowd of drunken, rough-looking miners who now were staggering across the narrow, dusty road toward her.

They reached her before she could tie up the team. One of them grasped her arm, tore the reins from her hand as he jerked her toward him. Tess went faint with nausea at the smell of liquor and tobacco and sweaty, dirty bodies.

She tried to jerk her arm free of the grip. The men were crowding around her, leering at her, reaching out paw-like hands to maul her.

"I done seen her first!" roared the man who grasped her arm. "And I'll shoot it out with any man what says that don't go!"

Terror rose high in Tess' throat. She searched the faces about her for one that would show some sign of decency.

"Stop it!" she cried out, jerking against the dragging hands. "Turn me loose!"

Somebody at the back of the crowd shouted, "Molly said they was to be four gals comin' from El Paso to help her in the saloon. Whar's the other three, blondie?"

Hope flared in Tess' eyes. She turned eagerly to the voice. "I'm not an entertainer from El Paso," she cried. "You've made a mistake. I'm Tinker Dan's daughter!"

But they didn't seem to realize what she was saying. Somebody tried to get in front of somebody else, to get closer to the girl, and the fight started from that. A fist lunged out, cracked against a leathery jaw. Somebody went down, and the crowd milled and staggered about his recumbent body.

Tess lifted despairing eyes and saw, for the first time, the two men on horseback before the assayer's office.

She saw the glint of sunlight on a bright metal star on the breast of the older of the two men, and relief flooded her. She cried out, lifted a white arm above the heads of the struggling men, called out.

She missed a number of things because of her excitement, her fear. She failed to see that the sheriff held a gun in one hand and that the weapon was trained on the other horseman. She didn't see that the younger horseman's dark eyes narrowed to slits and that his lips hardened into a firm line as her voice rang out, shrill with terror:

"I'm Tinker Dan's daughter! I'm no entertainer!"

What happened next was too fast for Tess to follow. First, her team bolted, frightened by the noise. It lunged round, headed for the two riders who had just pulled up in front of the assayer's office. Tess saw the two men split to let the lurching, jangling wagon pass. Then, almost simultaneously, the man who had grasped her wrist was a groaning heap on the ground and she felt herself lifted from her feet and to the saddle in front of the younger horseman.

His gray horse reared high and Tess felt a strong arm tighten about her as she clung to the saddle pommel. A voice close to her ear said, "Good girl! Hang on. We're ridin'!"

She knew that men went down beneath the pawing, angry hoofs of the big gray horse; she heard their screams of pain and fright. She heard a gun roar, saw the man with the badge brandishing a weapon, yelling, "Stop him! Yuh drunken, brawling scum, stop him!"

Then the hot wind was beating fiercely about her face, tearing her hair loose in long, golden strands and winding it about the neck of the man.

HE headed the horse for the foothills and she could hear him cursing softly whenever he glanced back over his shoulder to watch for the pursuers.

It was something like surprise that Tess realized she was not afraid of this man although she had never seen him, nor even heard his name. The fact that one of the pursuing men obviously was a sheriff, somehow didn't seem to be a reality; didn't frighten her in the least.

The big horse climbed the rocky side of the first hill, headed for a brush-covered ledge. Just as they were about to ride into the brush, or so it looked to Tess, the man jerked the reins and the horse moved sharply to the left. It was then that she saw the opening in the wall that was hidden from view on the trail by the scrub trees.

A second later they were inside a cool, dark cave and the man drew the horse to a halt. In the silence, Tess could hear the voices and the rattle of hoofs on the trail outside.

"We'll sit here so they won't hear Dusty's hoofs on this rock floor," the man said softly. "Then, when they've passed—"

Tess clearly saw his face for the first time, stared at its dark leanness, noted the width of his shoulder, the darkness of his eyes. An emotion she could not identify filled her throat and made talking a little difficult. But she said, as calmly as she could:

"Why are we running from them? He's the sheriff, isn't he? Why—"

"We're running away, ma'am, because it ain't safe for us to be out there." His lips curled in a grim little smile as he answered the rest of her qustion, "And Sam Willet is the sheriff, all right, but it still ain't safe —for me."

A little thrill of alarm slipped over her now. Perhaps she was being fooled by a handsome face, a pair of dark eyes. If an officer of the law were chasing him, maybe. . . .

She said, "I'm grateful to you for helping me to escape from those men back there, but I'm sure I'll be all right with the sheriff. If you'll let me down, I'll wait until you can get away before I join them."

A short, harsh laugh burst from his lips and his arm tightened about her waist as she tried to slip from the saddle.

"Reckon you better stay with me," he said. "This ain't no time for ex plaining anything, but I aim to take you along—" He broke off, suddenly put a lean hand over her mouth as the voices of the men outside grew loud and the hoofs of horses rattled on the rocky ledge outside the cave.

Tess tried to struggle, but the arm about her became a band of relentless steel. Her blue eyes blazed into his brown ones and fury rose to wipe out her fear. Had she been rescued from a mob of drunken rowdies by a man who promised the same unpleasant fate?

She heard the clang of many hoofs on the rocky ledge outside the cave. Instinctively she opened her lips and a cry for help ripped from her throat before the lean brown hand of the man who held her could stop it.

She heard the voice of the sheriff cry out a halt to his men. Then the brown hand clamped over her lips. The dark eyes that bored into her blue ones became pointed with an angry flame. A curse slipped from the clean-cut lips.

Then, without another word, he jerked the big horse around, headed him toward the back of the cave. Tess strained her ears, sat helpless against the arm about her, listening for sounds of pursuit behind them.

The sheriff and his men were coming, but in the gloom of the cavern she could not see them as she strained a look over the shoulder of the man who held her.

Then he jerked the big grey around a curve in the cave. The passage became narrow; wide enough for only one horse at a time. The sounds of pursuit became fainter.

ABRUPTLY they came into the sunlight. Above the fingers that covered her nose and mouth, Tess Logan could see a beautiful little valley buried within a circle of desolate hills. For a moment she forgot her fear in a breathless contemplation of the loveliness of this hidden oasis. Green trees, bright shrubbery grew in profusion as if fed by hidden springs of fresh water. The sun was as bright here, but it did not seem as hot, and a cool little breeze that smelled of water fanned Tess's face as the grey horse plunged them into the open.

She saw the log cabin, but not until they were almost upon it. The man headed the big horse around the low, sprawling building, jerked him up at the back. Easily and quickly he slipfrom the saddle, pulled Tess after him. He gave the grey a slap, and the horse ambled off toward a shed near a wall of rock behind the house.

In another second they were inside the log cabin and then Tess could hear the sounds of hoof beats and the voices of men, and knew their pursuers had left the cave and were in the little valley.

Swiftly the man bolted the back and front door, slammed shut the wooden windows and locked them. In the gloom of the cabin, now lighted only by daylight that filtered through occasional cracks between the logs, the girl stood looking around her, wondering what would happen next, what she could do.

The place looked inhabited, and it was spotlessly clean. Even the pots and pans that hung on the wall behind the iron range gleamed dully with a scoured brightness. There were two bunks at one side of the big fireplace and men's clothes hung from pegs in a corner.

When the last opening was bolted, the dark-eyed man turned, faced Tess. His face looked a little grim but doggedly determined in the gloom. Tess tried to stop trembling as he came over, stood close, looking down into her defiant blue eyes.

He said, "My name is Bart Evans, Miss Logan. I know your dad; he's talked a lot about you. There ain't no time to explain what this is all about now, but if you'll trust me for a little —believe me when I say that you're better off with me than you would be with them coyotes out yonder—"he jerked his head toward the door behind which the clatter of hoofs grew louder by the second,—"and after we get rid of Sheriff Willet and his gang I'll—"

A voice outside the door yelled then and Bart Evans broke off in the middle of his sentence, turned to face the door.

"Yuh want to come out quiet like, Bart," the sheriff roared, " or do we carry you out with a gullet full of lead?"

Bart Evans called, "I'm shootin' it out, Sam."

Tess Logan said. "Why does the sheriff want you? What have you done that's—"

Without turning from the door, Bart Logan reached for the gun at his hip and began examining it, then said, "There ain't no time for that, either. But if you trust me for just a little while, Tess—Miss Logan—" there was the slightest pause after the slip of her name, and Tess flushed as a little thrill tingled through her while she waited breathlessly for him to continue.

Then he whirled suddenly, dropped the gun back into its holster, grasped her two slim shoulders in his two lean hands. His dark eyes burned into her blue ones as he said:

"There's a lot of things I've got to say to you, Tess Logan, as soon as we get out of this spot. For a long time, now, I've been callin' you Tess in my mind; old Tinker drew a mighty live picture of you as he talked, nights—" He broke off, drew her suddenly into the circle of his arms.

As his dark head bent to hers, his lips closed over her mouth, Tess Logan realized for the first time why it was that she had, from the first, a feeling that she had kown Bart Evans a long, long time. She knew now, in this instant, as his lips moved in tingling ecstasy over hers, that Bart Evans was the vague, misty ideal of a man that had filled her dream life for the past three years.

Bart Evans was the dream man she had longed to meet, the man she wanted to share that dream house and spread with. She loved Bart Evans, and her heart had known it the moment she saw him!

Tess Logan's arms slipped up about the neck of Bart Evans. Her lips moved in response to his kiss. For a moment both of them forgot the menace outside that door. Tess forgot that he was a hunted man, and that she didn't even know why the law was after him. But if she had thought of it, she wouldn't have cared what the reason was, not while his lips were pressed against hers.

IT was the roar of a rifle and the clatter of lead against the log walls of the cabin that startled them out of their embrace. Bart Evans' dark eyes were suddenly alive and his lean, long figure sprang into action.

He moved to the one window in front of the cabin, opened the wooden shutter an inch, shoved his gun barrel through it. There was a loud roar in response to the tensing of his finger on the trigger. Over his shoulder he said:

"We got to keep them from gettin' to the back of the house. Can you handle a gun?"

"I can hit a rattler's eye at twenty-five feet," she said.

He looked over his shoulder at her, his white teeth showing in a grin. "Well, there's a mess of rattlers outside that door, honey, and there's a gun and some ammunition over there in the corner behind that bunk. If you'll hold 'em off on that side, I'll take care of this one. They're bound to run out of ammunition before dark and have to get out."

Tess had turned to the corner of the room where the clothes hung from pegs. There was a space between the wall on the side of the cabin and the end of the two bunks. There were some boxes and things sitting in the corner there. She saw a rifle and some boxes of cartridges. There was a holster and a gun hanging from the wall, beside the clothes.

As she reached for the gun in the holster, she heard Bart Evans' pistol roar, and almost simultaneously the high, shrill scream of a man in pain from outside.

"Got one of them," he exulted. "All the lead they waste on us is goin' right into these walls. And they're so thick nothin' short of a ax will get through them."

Tess grasped the butt of the gun, jerked it from the holster. Even be-

fore she had the gun out, she had recognized it; recognized the holster and the coat that hung beside it. Something cold closed about her heart, and a trembling grasped her about the knees, shook her until she could hardly stand.

The coat and holster and gun belonged to her father! As long as she could remember, Tinker Dan had carried that holster strapped about his waist. And the coat that hung on the wall beside it was one she, herself, had bought for him down in El Paso last year and given to him when she left him off in Malo three months ago. There was a hole in the coat, high on the shoulder, and around that hole was dried blood!

She picked up a box of bullets and walked back to Bart Evans' side. She said, casually, "This your cabin?"

The shooting had stopped for a moment, but Bart did not take his eyes off the slit in the window.

"Yeah," he said, "It's mine."

"Then what is my dad's coat doing here?" Tess shrilled suddenly, panic mingling with the fear in her voice. "His coat and his gun—and the coat with a bullet hole in it!"

The slamming of the window blind cracked like a shot in the quiet, and Bart Evans whirled to face her. His mouth was a thin, hard line now, and his eyes were narrowed.

"I asked you to trust me," he said slowly. "I ask it again, Tess. I—"

"Why is it that the sheriff is after you?" she demanded, ignoring his words. "Tell me or I'll ask him myself."

A grim smile twisted his lips. "The sheriff would tell you that he wants me for shooting Tinker Dan," he said harshly.

The color had drained from Tess's face. "Is he—dead?" she asked, her lips trembling over the word. "Oh, why, did you—"

His face softened a little. "No, he ain't dead," Bart Evans said softly. "And I didn't shoot him. He's been wounded, but it ain't serious. And—"

The back door of the cabin flung open abruptly and a voice snarled, "Drop yore gun, Evans, and heist yore hands, pronto."

Bart Evans' hands rose slowly, and he swung to face the red-faced sheriff who strode into the room, followed by three of his men.

INSTANTLY, relief and regret flooded through the girl. Because of her, Bart Evans was now a prisoner. They had both forgotten, for that brief tense moment, the menace in front of the cabin—forgotten long enough for the sheriff to slip around to the rear of the cabin.

And maybe she had been mistaken. Maybe—

The sheriff said, "I arrest yuh for the killin' of Tinker Dan Logan, Evans. Whar's his body?" He said this last eagerly, and stared hard at Bart Evans.

A sob broke from Tess Logan's lips, and the sheriff seemed to see her for the first time. He stared at her as Bart Evans said:

"I don't aim to do any talkin', Willet. I know what's on your mind and I know what you'll do with anything I say."

The sheriff was staring at the girl with suddenly bright thoughtful eyes. He walked over, took hold of her arm, smiling ingratiatingly.

"Mighty sorry you got such a welcome to Malo, Miss Logan," he said. "If you'll come along with us, now, I'll have some of the boys round up your outfit. My wife and I'll be happy to put you up at our place, until you decide what you—"

Bart Evans said, "Tess! Don't do it! Don't go with him! Stay here!" There was a sudden urgent plea in his voice, and she saw that his face had gone grim and his eyes bitter. Before she could answer, he snarled at the sheriff, "I see your game now,

you sidewinder! But if you think—"

Sam Willet was standing less than an arm's length from Bart Evans. Tess saw the sheriff's red face go almost purple, and before she could cry out or Bart Evans could move, the red fist clutching the gun that lined up on Bart Evans, lashed up and down.

There was the crack of metal against flesh and Bart Evans went down. Bart, unarmed, and his hands held from behind by the handcuffs that the sheriff had clamped on his wrists, never had a chance. He had ducked, true, but the gun had landed on the side of his head, and while it had not done as much damage as a full blow would have done, it knocked him unconscious.

Tess cried out in dismay, and would have dropped to her knees beside the fallen man if Sam Willet had not stopped her. His big flabby fat arms went about her, his hands grasped her elbows, held her.

"He's the man what killed yore dad, Miss Logan," he said gently. "Don't forget that. He's a sidewinder if there ever was one. He's been prospectin' with Tinker Dan, and Tinker came into town with the news that he'd made a strike. He took his gold to the assayer and it was the richest take of any that's been seen around here since the strike, a month ago.

"Then Dan left the assayers to go across the street and have a drink in the saloon before he went and filed his claim. There was a fight and Dan and Bart Evans was seen mixin' it. When the smoke cleared, both Dan and Bart Evans was gone.

"Today we rounded up Evans. We was takin' him in to town to jail when you hit town . . . You know the rest . . ."

Tess said, "My dad's coat and guns are here, in this cabin, and there's a bullet hole in the coat."

"It ties up," Sam Willet said eagerly. "This cabin is likely Bart Evans' hangout, though I don't recollect anybody's knowin' it was here before."

TESS let the sheriff take her to town and his house, tried to eat the food his wife set before her. But grief choked her and she couldn't swallow the food. After supper she wandered out to the front porch, sat down in the moonlight on a rickety, old rocking-chair. The Sheriff's harried looking wife followed her.

"Hadn't you better go to bed?" she asked anxiously.

"No," Tess told her. "I think I'll go talk to Mr. Willet. There's some things I want to know. Maybe they've found Dad."

The woman became distinctly nervous. "Maybe you'd better not," she said hastily. "Dan said—"

She tried to put a detaining hand on Tess's arm, but the girl gently shook it off, went firmly down the worn front steps and out toward the gate. "I've got to go," she said, and there was something in her voice that caused the older woman to draw back, although she looked after the girl with anxious, worried eyes.

Tess went directly to the building where the sheriff's office and town jail were located. The door was shut but there was a light inside and she shoved her way into a narrow, dingy hallway. A door opened off to the left of the hall and there was a light there. She started toward that door, stopped as a voice rasped out:

"I ain't tellin' yuh nothin', Sam Willet! And you and yore cut-throat gang can kill me, inch by inch, and I still won't talk!"

The voice was the voice of her father, Tinker Dan! It was that fact which stopped Tess Logan in her tracks, sent her back to the door which she had left a little open.

She heard Sam Willet say, "We got yore gal, Dan, and we got Bart Evans in jail so he can't take care of her.

Reckon you want to talk now?" There was a leer and a nasty snarl in his voice.

Tess heard her father say, "I don't believe it! Yuh ain't got Tess. Yuh're jest tryin' to make me tell yuh where that claim is—"

She didn't wait to hear more. Tense and white with anger and fear, she went flying from the dilapidated little building. But there was a gladness mixed with it—gladness that she had been wrong about Bart Evans. There was remorse, too, in her heart. Bart Evans had asked her to trust him. Her heart had told her that he was the man she loved, but she had disobeyed both her heart and the voice of the man she loved. And in so doing, she had nearly forfeited his life.

She had to save him! Had to save Bart Evans and her father from Sam Willet. There were things she didn't understand—why, for instance, the man who represented the law in Malo would try to steal her dad's gold claim. She knew that was wrong and that it wouldn't be righted until her father and Bart Evans were free.

THE jail was at the rear of the sheriff's office. All was dark there, and there was no one on guard because the door was strongly barred with steel. Tess moved to the window in back of the building where she wouldn't be seen by anyone coming from the sheriff's office. The window, too, was barred.

Softly she called Bart Evan's name. Almost instantly his lean face appeared directly above her, behind the bars.

Swiftly she told him what she had seen and heard inside the sheriff's office.

"I've made a mistake," she said. "A terrible one, Bart Evans. I want to fix it if I can. What—"

"Is this a trap?" he asked. "Did the sheriff send you?"

Tess gripped cold, trembling hands together, stared up at him with wide, pleading eyes. Then she said, "Come around to the door. I—I'll try to prove it."

He was standing before the long bars at the door when she walked up the steps. She glanced over her shoulder, prayed that nobody would see her. Then she thrust two slender arms through the bars.

"Lean closer, Bart Evans," she commanded softly. "Closer," she insisted as his face drew near.

She clasped her hands behind his neck, stood on her toes and her lips pressed against his. For a moment his mouth was cold and hard beneath her's. She whispered, "I love you, Bart. I loved you long before I saw you today. I knew it the minute I looked at you. Believe me, Bart! Believe me!" Her hands tightened, her lips pleaded against his, transmitting all her love to this dark-eyed man.

As she stepped back, she could hear his breath coming in quick, panting gasps, and her hands dropped from his shoulders.

"I believe you!" he said softly. "I want to believe you! I'll tell you how you can help, but if you fail it'll mean yore Dad's life, too."

"I won't fail," Tess told him, her voice grim. "I won't fail you—again —Bart Evans."

He talked swiftly. She was to ride to the Border town of Dugan's Pass, contact the Ranger officer there, tell him to send help. She was to file their claim there, too, just in case Sam Willet made her Dad talk and filed the claim in Malo before she could get back with help.

"They ganged Tinker that day in the saloon when he went for a drink. It's likely Sam's working with the filing clerk, and I got wind of it just about the time the fight started. I saw, too late, that they meant to get Dan, but I managed to spoil their aim. They got him in the shoulder instead of the heart. I got him to my place, fixed his shoulder. He went back to our claim in the hills while I headed

for Dugan's Pass to file it. They caught me, Sam and his men, when I tried to circle Malo."

"I'll make it," Tess said grimly. "And I'll bring help. If Dad just won't talk, won't tell them anything in the meantime—"

She didn't kiss him again although she wanted to. One of his lean, browned hands slipped through the bars, gripped her cold little fingers for an instant. "He won't, darling," he chuckled softly. "He's got your stubbornness." His face went grim as he added: "But honey, Willet don't aim to let me and yore dad live to reach no court. He can't afford to. But we'll try to hold on 'till you get back. Hurry . . ."

Just exactly how Tess got hold of a horse, how she got to Dugan's Pass and to Ranger headquarters, she never was quite sure. But she made it in little over an hour. Most of the little Border town was dark, but there was a light in the Ranger's office and there was a man on duty there.

When she had told her story he said, "We've had other complaints about Malo. But nothing definite enough to give us a chance to do anything about it; just a couple of mysterious disappearances. Lone prospectors who might have been killed for their claims, but nothing could be proven. However, from your story I'd say we've got the goods on the crooked law in Malo this time. If we can get there in time to save your father and Evans so they can give us evidence, act as witnesses—"

Tess had gone pale. "We've got to get there in time," she whispered. "Oh, we've got to!"

While the Ranger captain rounded up his men, Tess, following his directions, found the house of the claim clerk and filed the claim in her father's and Bart Evans' names.

THE night sky was still star-studded when Tess and the Ranger captain headed the little posse of eight men across the desert toward Malo. It was Tess who set the pace, and she urged her horse through the chill night air as fast as he could gallop.

Through her head Bart's words: "Willet won't let me and your dad live to get to a court . . ." beat in time to the thud of horses hoofs, and a breathless fear held her in its cold grip.

It was the Ranger captain who noticed the glow in the sky. "Looks like there might be a fire over thataway," he said suddenly.

Tess had been so absorbed in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed the faint pink of the sky which presaged dawn. Then she remembered the abrupt turn around the foothill that they had to take to reach Malo, and a little gasp slipped from her lips.

"After we turn the bend," she cried, "Malo will be over in that direction. The fire must be in Malo!"

"Likely a shack burning down, or maybe something going on at the mines," the ranger said calmly. "No reason to get excited anyway, Miss Tess."

She tried not to. She tried to stay calm, to suppress the premonition of disaster that weighed upon her like a blanket of doom.

They rounded the bend at the foot of the first hill. Then they rounded the last hill, came in sight of Malo. The flames leaped high from several different spots. It was now just a matter of yards between the riders and the edge of town.

"The jail!" Tess cried suddenly. "Its burning!"

She heard the man beside her say, "Ride for the jail; we're right behind yuh!" Then she was ahead of them, flying through the night. The horse seemed to feel the urgency of her appeal as she leaned far over his neck and pleaded with him for more speed. His hoofs seemed to fly though the air.

Half the population of the town and

mines seemed to be lined up in a circle around the four buildings that were afire. The bank, the assayers office, the jail and a house, were blazing. The house was almost gone and it seemed that the fire had started there and spread to the other buildings. Only the jails roof was burning.

Suddenly, as she maneuvered her horse through the crowd, Tess saw a familiar face—a fat, soft looking face that she instantly recognized. It was Sheriff Sam Willet, and he was standing back on the edge of the crowd.

Tess stopped, waited for the Ranger captain to join her. She pointed to Sam Willet just as the sheriff turned and saw her. She saw his fat face reflect surprise and figured that he undoubtedly believed she was still safely in bed at his own house.

She called to the Ranger, "There's the sheriff! Stop him! He'll surely try to get away—"

She broke off. The sheriff had turned and was frantically making his way through the crowd. The Ranger, seeing this, put the spurs to his horse, lurched around, called orders to his men, and followed the fleeing man.

Tess waited to see no more. Wide-eyed, the bewildered citizens of Malo stared at the strange group of horsemen, and their running sheriff. Nobody paid any attention to the girl as she swung her horse toward the end of the line of flaming buildings—the jail.

THE glow of the fire illuminated the whole town. As she rounded the side of the building that housed the sheriff's office and the jail, she saw no sign of a figure in the doorway where she had last seen Bart Evans.

She left the horse at a safe distance from the burning building. The flames were creeping down the sides now, reaching out flaming fingers for the iron bars of the door and the single window.

Maybe they weren't there. Maybe Sam Willett had moved them out. Maybe—

Two crouching figures ran around the building from the other side, reached the iron-barred door, began to fumble with the lock. They didn't see the girl because they were so intent upon what they were doing. She heard a husky, unrecognizable growl, "Come on out of there, Evans, and bring Dan along with yuh. And come fast; its gettin' damn hot around here."

Tess was right behind them now. She had halted, breathless, waiting for a reply. Her heart began a wild thudding as it came; Bart Evans' voice, steady and calm said:

"You can go to hell, and take Sam Willet along with you. We ain't coming out of here unless we come with guns in our hands. You can tell Sam that. Tell him we know he don't aim to let us live anyhow, and this way will be the quickest. Tell him he either slips us guns through them bars, or he don't even have a fightin' chance of gettin' us to tell him the location of that claim."

Tess heard the men at the door cussing as they eyed the licking flames above them.

Even as she listened, Tess had drawn the gun at her hip—the gun she had never been without since Tinker Dan had first sent her out alone with the wagon. She had it ready, pointed at the backs of the two cursing figures even as Bart voiced his bluff.

For Tess recognized that speech of his as a bluff. She knew he would be figuring that with guns they might have a chance—and that any minute now she should be back with help. But outside that burning building they would be spirited away from Malo, from the protection of a citizenry that might be roused at the suggestion of a too flagrant violation of rights.

As Bart's voice stopped, Tess moved a step nearer to the jail door.

She snapped, "Turn with your hands high. Otherwise I'm shooting."

One of them tried to turn with a gun in his hand, and she had to shoot him. As he sank to the ground almost at her feet, Tess heard Bart say, "Thank God! Dan, she's here!"

She kept her eyes on the other man who didn't move as his partner sank to the ground beside him. They had already opened the door of the jail; she had waited for that. She saw Bart come through it now, and he was carrying her father in his arms.

A sob rose in her throat, but she didn't let it escape, didn't let her fear show in her face or cause the hand holding the gun to move even the slightest bit.

The sound of hoofs on hard earth came from behind her. Even then she didn't turn. It might be the Rangers, but if it weren't, turning wouldn't help matters.

It was the Rangers. In another moment, a tall, sinewy figure had appeared beside her, said, "All right, now, ma'am. We'll take these coyotes over and tie 'em up with the rest of their outfit."

THEN she was in Bart Evan's arms, kneeling beside the figure of Tinker Dan whom Bart had placed some distance from the burning building, his back against a tree.

"I'm all right, honey," her father grinned at her reassuringly. "Them sidewinders jest tried to use the old Indian trick of burning the soles of my feet to get me to tell 'em where our claim is. They give up when me and Bart started raisin' sand, hollerin' to set people to wonderin'. They was aimin' to slip us out of town under cover of the fire and give us some more of the same, some place back in the hills. But everything's all right now, honey. We've struck it rich, and me and you is goin' to settle down on that spread I allus promised—"

"Hold on there, Dan," Bart drawled, pulling Tess closer into the circle of his arm. "Reckon you're goin' to have to do a little readjustin' there. You had yore turn, now its mine. Tess and me are goin' to get us a spread over there in the valley. But there'll be room for you there, too, when you ain't out rootin' in the hills for more gold." He looked down at Tess, his eyes tender, a smile on his lips. "How about it, honey?"

Color flooded Tess' face, and her eyes dropped from the adoration in his. She took one of her father's gnarled hands and said, "That's the way it is, dad. You wouldn't be happy tied down to a spread anyway. Prospecting is in your blood. But you'll always have a home to come to."

Tinker Dan was staring at the two of them, as they stood up, turned to each other. "Well, I'll be damned! She's growed to be a woman, and I ain't never noticed it before."

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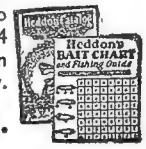

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MUSTANG

Wade Austin, horse hunter, faced the roaring guns of Thunder Hill's outlaw gang to capture Spook, king of the wild mustangs—and win the love of a stout-hearted girl

CHAPTER I
Dangerous Signals

WADE AUSTIN, crouching over his fire of pitch pine chunks and holding a forked stick strung with strips of bacon broiling above the coals, looked up as the scream of a mountain lion sounded nearby.

It was very close, and like the shriek of a woman driven insane by terror or mortal pain; it filled the night-curtained forest. The horses, staked nearby just beyond the cheery radiance of the flames, shied and snorted fearfully at the screech of that most deadly of their wild enemies. Austin rose to his feet, calmed them, pulled his carbine from its leather scabbard, and noiselessly faded into the shadows.

BLOOD

By EDGAR L. COOPER

A Thrilling Romance of The Wild-Horse Country

Her laughter tinkled up to the low-hung stars at the look of startled, stunned surprise that froze his lean features.

Standing there, peering into darkness, he could see nothing at first, but the nervous antics of his animals warned him that the puma was stalking close to his camp, and presently, off among the brush and tree boles, he caught a glimpse of two green spots.

The youth fired quickly at the lambent targets. A crash in the underbrush, a savage snarl, followed by the swift disappearances of the two spots, told Wade that he'd likely nicked the varmint or at least scared it so bad it wouldn't come again during the night.

Levering out the empty cartridge, still standing out in the dark, there came to him the queerly uneasy feeling that he was not alone. He stiffened, leaning forward, trying to pierce the gloom with suddenly wary eyes. Just heard the horses moving, he told himself after a moment, and returned to his fire.

He replaced his carbine against the adjacent tree, started to finish his interrupted supper. Yet his occupation couldn't shake that eerie sensation, as if someone were watching him, and Wade kept his ears keened for any untoward sound above the sough of the night wind in the conifers.

Suddenly he lifted his head, grew taut, as he drove a glance into the blackness. For the darkness just beyond the fire's radiance seemed to part a second—split just enough to let through a gliding form which came straight toward him.

AS THE crimson glow fell upon it, Wade saw this ghost of the night transform itself into a girl.

He didn't move; it was as if she were unreal. In this high country of the Thunders where men were few—and bad—and women fewer, no wonder he stared at her as if she were an apparition. But as she came up to the fire and faced him across its aura, she looked into his eyes and smiled.

"Hello." Her voice was rich, a little throaty, musical as the sound of the rill below the camp. "I'm afraid you'll have to take me in for the night."

Wade Austin got to his feet. The sense of unreality was leaving him, but the feeling of wonder was far stronger; he saw that she was young, younger than himself by a full year or two. She carried her hat in her hand, and her rumpled hair was tawny as the pelt of a panther. She wore a man's attire.

"Good Lord, miss!" Wade said, finding his voice with difficulty. "How—why—what are you doing way out here, alone—?"

"I've been set afoot," she calmly told him. "I was late starting home from a visit, and had gotten off my horse for a moment. A lion screamed, my cayuse bolted, and—"

She shrugged slim shoulders. "That's all. It was lucky I saw your fire and heard you shoot."

A bit longer Wade stared at her, her eyes meeting his frankly, a bit amused, unreserved as a man's. Greenish eyes beneath dark lashes, in a face whose sheer beauty was breath-taking. Tanned to even gold, with a smattering of nubbin freckles across her nose, and a mouth the color of ripe chokecherries. Her teeth were small and even.

"Well?" Her smile deepened. "Think you can stand me for one night?"

Wade swallowed his Adam's apple, felt his face grow hot as the fire. "Excuse me, ma'am," he mumbled, dropping quickly to his haunch. "You plumb flabbergasted me. "I'll have coffee and bacon ready in two shakes, an' the beans are already hot. Just make yoreself plumb at home."

"Good. Let me help. I'm plenty experienced in wrangling chuck."

He glanced up. "You said you were on yore way home, awhile ago," he ventured. "You live hereabouts?"

She looked at him with swift appraisal.

"You're a stranger to the Thunders?" she asked in turn, evenly. It was more a statement than a question.

"Yes'm. Just ridin' through for a look around."

"You wouldn't, by any chance, be looking for a job up here?"

Her query was casual enough, but Wade Austin didn't miss the underlying dryness, or the levelly-held eyes regarding him.

"No'm," he answered slowly, "not exactly a hire-out job. I've heard there's a bunch of wild horses over

on Mustang Mesa, and thought I'd shag over that way for a look at 'em. Maybe try my hand at catching a few, if the sign's right."

Her gaze sharpened; Wade felt those cat-green eyes stabbing through him like knives, probing, dissecting. "You're a mustang trapper?" She asked, almost indifferently.

His eyes were upon the quirly he was building. "Reckon you could call me that. Done quite a bit over in the Texas' Guadalupes where I've got sort of a two-bit hoss spread."

"I see."

FOR a while there was silence between them as the youth smoked and stared into the fire's heart. Now and then he stole a look at the girl as she ate, seated cross-legged on the ground as a man would, and he was wondering about her people—who and where they were; why she rode these hills at night.

He'd heard men talk of the Thunders, and those who lived there. They had talked with scowls on their faces and oaths on their lips. They told of folks who dwelt up there with prices on their heads and black shadows along their backtrails, who found sanctuary among that rough, timbered rampart tagged Thunder Hills.

So, he'd journeyed up from the flatlands, expecting to find hard men and ugly realities and *she* had walked out of the night into the crimson circle of his fire. Beauty instead of deadliness—

The girl didn't appear to be watching him as she dined—but she was, with a faint, crooked smile edging her lips. She could have told him, had she chosen, that while he'd been experiencing that uneasy feeling of being stalked, alone at his camp, she had been watching him out of the darkness—until she was satisfied with what she saw in his bronzed young face and gray eyes. Eyes which despite his youth—Wade was twenty-three—held the grim experience of older men.

"Is it true," he asked at last, "about the horse herd over on Mustang?"

She nodded. "Very true. But I'm afraid your hopes in that direction are doomed to disappointment. Folks up here aren't exactly chummy with strangers, or don't take kindly to company."

She was watching him steadily, intently, with almost a look of expectancy on her face. "Horse hunters have come before you—who weren't after broomtails—" she finished quietly.

"Reckon I *sabe,* miss." Wade raised his eyes. "And me—what do you think?"

"The law of the Thunders," she went on, not answering his question, "says 'no tracks beyond Halfaman Creek.' You're about a quarter mile on the safe side of that deadline, my young friend."

"I heard about that, down below." His words were slow, level. "They told me I might get in—that I wouldn't come out. That the law of the Thunders was—the law of old Bronc Terrill."

She borrowed tobacco and papers from Wade, rolled a deft smoke before answering. Then, as she returned the makins:

"They've talked to you plenty, outside, about Bronc Terrill?"

"I heard his name mentioned a time or two," Wade said, a little diffidently. "Down in San Marcial, mostly—"

She smiled. "You'd never make a good liar, *amigo.* Oh, well—don't you think it's time we knew each other's names?"

"Yes'm." He grinned, suddenly at ease. "Mine's Wade. Wade Austin."

"And I'm Ramona. Mona — for short."

"Mona—" He repeated it under his breath, as she flicked a swift look at his face, a smile twitching her red mouth.

"Mona Terrill," she finished gently, and her laughter tinkled up to the low-hung stars at the look of startled, stunned surprise that froze young Wade Austin's lean features.

"You can sleep in your six-shooter tonight, *Senor* Austin!" she told him with throaty mockery, tossing her quirly into the coals.

"But daylight, like bedground, comes early in these parts! *Buenas nochas, amigo mio . . .*"

But Wade Austin lay for a long time staring at the star-dusted sky. For he heard, far and clear on the high air, the mournful wail of a cow-horn conch—echoing again and again across the dark hills. Most likely it was a signal calling together the clan of Terrill—

But if the girl beyond the coals heard, she gave no sign.

CHAPTER II
Love Blossoms

THE riotous glory of a New Mexican sunrise was painting the Thunders when Wade and Mona Terrill came to the white waters of Half-aman Creek, deadline to dwellers of the flat country. She rode the youth's pale sorrel easily, though the beautiful stallion was restive and nervous because a woman was in the kak. Wade, afoot, led his pack horse.

"Well, here she is, cowboy," Mona said, indicating the stream. "And, all horseplay aside, we'd better part company. There's no earthly use in your going farther—and I rather like you."

He looked up at her—at the picture she made in the sun's first lances, with the tawny riot of her hair and the warm, questioning light in her green eyes. He wondered what this web of circumstances held for him.

"I'll go on, if it's just the same to you," he said quietly.

She bit her lower lip and regarded him steadily for a brief moment. If it were just the same to her! There wasn't a weak sinew in him—this lithe well-knit youngster with the dark hair, piercing gray eyes and clean-cut face. He radiated strength, physical and mental. Quiet, unassuming — and wholly unsophisticated about women—

Yet he would take up an affront or sign swift receipt for an insult. A good man to have with you in a pinch—!

"So be it then," Mona said suddenly, decisively. Her eyes swept the opposite bank, mist-veiled, densely wooded, rising into a conglomeration of ridges and gulleys. Then she sent the sorrel into the shallow water and looked back at Wade.

"Just get down and rein the stem," he told her. She did, and watched with open admiration as Wade gave a two-note whistle and the once wild-horse splashed back across the creek to where his master waited.

When Wade rejoined her, and she was mounted again, Mona said, "He loves you. Sure he won't pack double?"

"Darned sure. And, he likes you some—or you wouldn't be forkin' him. There's mighty few folks he'll let sit his middle, outside me."

"Well, I'll lead out, then. Yell when your feet go ringy."

WADE, following his horse's tail, face shadowed by quirly smoke, let his thoughts dwell free upon this startling girl of the high country. He knew little about women, but he could tell—and it puzzled him plenty—that she used the speech of one who had a good education yet mixed it with the lingo of the West. She'd told him practically nothing about herself or her folks—and he'd been wise enough to ask no questions, save about the Broomtail herd over Mustang Mesa, which she'd answered frankly enough.

Yet her canny queries, put with such cleverness, had pretty well unshrouded his own life. Wade had told

her things, hardly without knowing he did so, about his orphaned youth; of the tough old relative who'd reared him the hard way, taught him how to hunt and shoot, trap and read sign, find water where apparently there was none, capture the wily fuzztail; of his tiny cabin in the Guadalupes, which he'd built himself and where he'd lived through the lonely winters cherishing hopes; of the shoe-string iron he'd started and hoped to build into something worthwhile. Wade Austin had unburdened himself, without knowing just why, of a deep loneliness within himself, but whose existence he would have hotly denied.

Yes, he had opened his innermost, secret heart to this girl who was leading him along a dim trail into the crazy badlands of Thunder Hills whose citizens shot first, then looked to see what they killed. Yet, thinking of all that now, he didn't mind—

SUDDENLY she reined in Nugget, motioning for Wade to stop. A horseman had appeared on a knoll ahead, a bit off the trail; two others joined him quickly. A faint, high yell echoed across the swales as they called to someone below: Mona Terrill flung up an arm in signal, waved her Stetson to and fro a couple of times.

The trio disappeared down the slope, riding for the trail where other hoofbeats were already pounding toward the creek. Mona looked around at the youth with a faint, wry grin.

"Reception committee, *amigo*. I imagine we've been under the mistletoe ever since crossing Halfaman. I hope Bronc is not far off—"

Wade didn't miss the anxious note in that last low remark and he set himself for trouble, for he hadn't expected to enter the Thunders without some opposition.

The trio of riders they'd seen atop the knoll crashed out of the timber shagging their mounts hard. The three reined in and stared first at Mona Terrill then at Wade Austin and back again. The swarthy, frog-built man in the lead, his dark face showing a livid scar from ear to chin, leered at Wade with close-set dangerous-looking eyes, his hand resting close to a holster-freighted hip.

"Picked up a pilgrim, didja, Mona? Where in hell 'n hominy yuh been all night, anyhow?"

The coarse, raspy voice hinted at dark insinuations which their spawner dared not openly express, but which grated on Wade Austin like file on steel, causing a flush to stain his cheekbones and his lips thinned warningly.

The girl came back at the speaker like a striking rattler.

"Keep that scummy tongue buttoned behind your teeth, Shag Rowel, or I'll smash it shut with a hot slug!" The man flinched from the words as though they were a flame, and Mona's fingers lightly tapped the butt of the six-shooter she wore.

"I'm explaining nothing to you, you lousy tramp! Where's Bronc?"

Shag Rowel glared, swallowed, growled deep in his throat. One of his companions answered. "Bronc's a-comin, Miss Mona. He's been lookin' for you most of the night. Ever since yore pony come in."

She nodded. "He bolted at a cougar, left me riding shank's-mare. My friend, here, kindly put me up for the night."

"Who'n hell is *he* an what's he doin' over here?" Shag burst out.

"We'll explain that to Bronc," said Mona clippedly. "It's none of *your* damned business."

"Almighty smart an' high-falutin' aintcha? Well, we ain't monkeyin' with the likes of that sugar-tit kid yuh got tied to yore apron strings! I've seen them baby-faced johnnies before—"

"That's ample, fella." Wade Austin's words were a silky drone, with

an undercurrent of deadliness which caused the other two men to eye him sharply.

"Plumb ample. I reckon you heard what the lady said about buttoning yore lip. Well, that goes *double! Sabe?"*

For the moment sheer rage rendered Shag speechless; the veins corded on his neck and forehead like they would burst, his scarred face became mottled as a turkey's wattles.

"Why—you—you! . . ." he choked, thickly, big body going stiff. Mona Terrill looked at him with a sneer.

"Yonder comes Bronc and Dud," she said meaningly. "Tell them, Shag!"

The tenseness went out of Rowel's frog torso and the veins subsided in his distorted visage, but the rage and hate didn't die in his close-set eyes as they stared at Wade Austin's face.

BRIEFLY, Wade shifted his gaze to look at the newcomers. One was a young fellow, slim, dark, swift eyed, with an expressionless face. His name was Dud Creech and he lived alone in a shack on distant Demijohn Creek.

The other was a wiry oldster whose body seemed made of barbed wire and whang leather, whose thin face was burned almost black by sun and wind and Thunder weather. His hair and ragged mustache were grizzled. He had the high cheekbones of an Indian and a redskin's knife-thin lips. But his eyes, dark-blue beneath craggy brows, were those of a young man, though sharp, wise and encompassing.

They were eyes which knew all the answers. Wade Austin sensed that fact the instant he felt them upon him, and he returned their x-ray scrutiny.

"Just what seems to be the trouble here?" the oldster asked with deceptive mildness.

All except Wade Austin knew that Bronc Terrill was dangerous as a bull rattler in August when he spoke in that soft, suave voice.

"Shag seems to think it his duty to sand out this young fellow, here," Mona answered spiritedly, hot anger in her tone, "just because he befriended me last night when Dixie bolted and left me afoot beyond Halfaman."

In a few, terse sentences Mona acquainted Bronc with the gist of the happenings. Terrill, a limp quirly stub plastered to a mouth corner, listened without comment, his squinted eyes inscrutable.

There was a little silence after she finished. Then Dud Creech spoke harshly.

"But what's he doin' up here in the first place, Mona? An' why did yuh bring him across the deadline?"

Before she could answer, or before Wade could, Bronc Terrill held up a silencing hand. Just a slight gesture —but it was enough.

"That'll come out in the wash, folks. Here's your mare we brung along, girl. Hit leather, an' let the kid fork his own."

He spat out his quirly butt, kneed his claybank around.

"We're riding for the Roost," he said briefly. *"Andiamo."*

The tone of his voice even made Mona turn her head to regard him for a fleeting second.

IT WAS rather a silent ride, back to that deep, crag-walled canyon called the Roost, where several low buildings of native stone, thatched with sage and mesquite, squatted against its far end beside a curling mountain rill that bisected the little valley.

Mona Terrill rode between Bronc and Dud Creech. Wade was behind them in company with a redheaded fellow whose sharp features were crafty and mean and whose name was Jode. Shag Rowel brought up the drag with the last rider, and Wade

could feel his malignant mink eyes boring holes between his shoulder blades as the rods fell behind.

He knew, too, that the others talked now and then in low tones, their stares upon him. Wade was aware of their hard, silent regard, and he kept a blank face and easy attitude. He knew Rowel would cause trouble at the first opportunity—and the dirtiest trouble he knew. And . . . that fellow Creech reminded Wade of a cross between wolf and fox, with eyes unreadable as a gila monster's.

But, when the calvacade arrived at the Roost, tended their horses and Bronc Terrill gestured Wade into the front room of the largest cabin, the youth from Texas' Guadalupes felt strangely at ease, despite the aura of silent hostility surrounding him. Mona, Creech, Bronc and himself were the only ones in the room, but the others hunkered just outside.

"Now, young feller," began Bronc, lighting his brownie, "how come you're headin' this way?"

"I've heard," Wade replied quietly, "tales of a red stallion on Mustang Mesa. I wanted to see, for myself, if they were true."

Bronc eyed him a long moment, left eye half-shut, the right one wide open. After a while he asked, "Why?"

"To have a try at him, if the sign's right."

"I've known of several men tryin' to catch that red hoss," Bronc said in a dry voice. "He's been out there quite a while, the Spook has."

"He goes away just like smoke in a high wind," Mona added. "Or—like a wind that stops blowing all at once."

She looked full at Wade and her look was mocking, challenging and daring, but her even, white teeth flashed behind the red witchery of her swift smile. Wade, the blood thumping in his temples, nodded as he slowly built a smoke, lighted it with a match flicked on his thumbnail.

"So men say, down below. That's why I rode this trail."

The short quiet was shattered with Dud Creech's scoffing. "Hell! When even Bronc or myself ain't been able to snag Spook—you think *you* can cut 'er? And come riding across Halfaman like you owned—"

Once more Bronc raised a gnarled hand, abruptly shutting off Creech.

"Halter that. Long as Mona got through okay, it don't matter."

He turned to Wade, smiled crookedly through tobacco smoke. "I reckon," he said slowly, "somebody was tryin' to play a joke on you, son."

HOWEVER, late that afternoon, young Austin was still at the Roost, accepting Bronc's tacit invite to remain overnight before starting back to the flatlands. He was seated on a crude, circular bench built around a huge cottonwood bole near the spring branch, staring out across the little basin toward the high timbered ramparts and wooded ridges of the Thunders.

He stared as though he were looking for something. But Mona, who sat beside him, saw that his eyes had a glint instead of a light. Her own were very soft and understanding as she watched him.

"Queer, about you and myself, Wade," she said softly. "It wasn't just by chance that we met out yonder last night."

"It was meant to be," the youth said low-voiced. "I never talked to a girl like I have to you. I reckon I've known you, *always*. Been looking for you, *always*."

"I know." She placed slim, strong fingers over his bronzed hand. "I think we understand, Wade, without words. You and I."

"I never knew life could be like this," he said simply.

It *was* queer, the instinctive, frank understanding that had grown between them from their first moment

of contact; a thing which grew beyond any shadow of a doubt as the seconds ticked away. Some girls might have asked themselves whether he did care; whether the love which they felt was shared by him. Mona never questioned it. Not since that first moment.

Behind her were years of wild upbringing, having been raised like a boy. She could ride and rope, shoot and camp, good as any hand, despite the two terms she had spent in the California school which seemed more of a prison than an institution of learning. After that she had returned to her foster-father, Bronc Terrill.

The hills were in her blood; the scent of pine and cedar, of mountain water and flower-starred valley. Just as those things were hot in the veins of young Wade Austin, *huerfano* of the Guadalupes. Both in a sense were outcasts, waifs of the world, with the bond of a common, mutual understanding strongly welding them together.

No, Mona Terrill didn't question what she knew of Wade. It was natural as breathing; she didn't dissimulate one iota of what she felt. With the knowledge of her own natural love for him had come a faith and surety of his own feelings which made any coquetry or pretense appear ridiculous.

Old Bronc, curiously watching from his sitting-room window, right eye narrow, left one open, burned face tilted against the smoke of his quirly, nodded slightly to himself as a grin twisted his mouth.

Gals were funny. Unpredictable as spring weather. Couldn't tell which way they would jump—if they were like Mona. It looked like she'd jest been waiting for that Wad younker, in spite of her halfway and malicious encouragement of Dud Creech, who was plumb boogery about her. And Dud was bad medicine when crossed.

Well, it would come out in the wash, Bronc reckoned. He'd done his best with Mona, child of his closest friend, long dead. He had done his level best despite what folks said of him down below, and the ugly tales coupled with his name. Despite the hate felt for him by some right here in these hills which he ruled—his little domain on this ball of earth.

The gal had a right to marry who she wanted to. *She* had to live with the feller—not him, Bronc Terrill.

Two others, unseen by anyone except themselves, watched the pair beneath the cottonwood. One was Shag Rowel, crouched behind a sheltering brush corral, his eyes aflame with hate and face livid with passion. The fingers of his right hand curled around the butt of his cedar-handled six-shooter like writhing snakes; his breath came hard and unevenly.

Mona Terrill was in his blood. He wanted her—wanted her with all the vicious desire of the male brute, and that desire ate deeper and deeper into him like a corrosive poison. The two beneath the tree, openly expressing their love for each other in gesture and word, filled Shag Rowel with a murderous fury. His thick lips moved, baring jagged teeth.

"Yuh ain't got airy out that don't call for a ounce of lead in yore gizzard, you sugar-tit sonuva—Tehanner!"

The other watcher was Dud Creech laired on a hillside deep in covert, a pair of powerful glasses glued to his eyes, and as the lens brought Mona and Wade within his vision—so near he could almost touch them—his dark face was distorted and he breathed quickly, as if he'd been running. The very process of his espionage fed his soul more venom, fanned the fires of unbridled jealousy.

"He'll never get her, by God!" Creech muttered between tight teeth. *"I'll* see to *that!"*

Then, slowly, Dud took the glasses from his eyes which faded from fury into cunning. Triumphant cunning—

He slapped his thigh, lips parting in a wolfish, gloating grin.

"Now why in hell," he exulted, "didn't I think of that afore!"

Still chuckling, he stalked cautiously along the hill, rifle in a crooked elbow, so as to come to the cabins from the far side, and it was this choice of route which disclosed to him the spying hulk of Shag Rowel behind the corral.

For a moment Dud Creech stopped stock still, eyes narrowing to slits and hell's own light flamed in them when they popped open.

"Couldn't ast for anything sweeter! By gawd—*no!*"

And just by way of letting folks know he was in the vicinity, Creech deftly shot the head off a frolicsome squirrel high in a pine many yards away and up. It was fun watching the headless ball of fur bounce from limb to limb before hurtling to the ground!

Shag Rowel's ugly face was heavy with satisfaction.

CHAPTER III
Stacked Cards

SUNUP saw activity at the Roost corrals where Ropes flashed, dust rose, men exchanged oaths and badinage. Early breakfast had been eaten, and Wade Austin was ready to take his departure.

Curiously enough, he wasn't heading back toward Halfaman Creek, and the low country beyond. His goal was the not so distant Mustang Mesa, and the red stallion.

Queer, the way it had come about. At least, it would have seemed queer to one not so well versed in the ways of men—and reading them—as was the youth from the Guadalupes. Long and hard years of contact with all sorts had given him an uncanny insight into their figurations, which more than once had stood him in good stead.

So he knew, as did the wise-eyed Bronc Terrill, that there was a very black nigger in the woodpile when Dud Creech, at supper the previous night, carelessly suggested that young Wade be allowed to try his hand at snagging the Spook. It was a suggestion made with a sly sneer.

"Let him show us how they cut 'er over in Texas, Bronc!"

Bronc shot a quick look at Creech, as though to say: "What dam' deviltry are you brewin' up now?" But he hunched a shoulder, smiling wryly at Wade as he queried, "Want a go at it, son?"

"Yes sir, I do." Wade's reply was very quiet, and Bronc saw that Mona's nostrils were pinched tight, her lips drawn into a thin line as she stared at Dud, her green eyes glinting.

Shag Rowel, seated down the table, guffawed. Slapped the board with hairy paw, seemingly convulsed with mirth.

"He's got the chanct," he chuckled, "of a snowball in hell fire! On which same I'll bet a fifty dollar saddle ag'in a pint of drinkin' likker."

Wade looked at him bleakly. "Once I drew to an inside straight—and made it, Rowel."

Shag, slow-witted, scowled.

It was settled, then and there. Bronc told the youth to hop to it; acquainted him briefly with the range and habits of the Red Spook; explained the terrain. Dud Creech, with apparent honesty, put in his suggestions, recounting just how he'd fallen down at catching the stallion. Even Shag threw in ribald advice, as did one or two others.

But Mona Terrill kept her peace, face expressionless, eyes fixed on the tip of her cigarette. She knew, as did Bronc and Wade Austin, that the deck had been stacked, and marked cards were being dealt.

And that night, before all sought early beds, she saw Wade alone for a brief moment. "No need to tell you how the wind blows," she said low-voiced. "You understand, don't you?"

"Yes," he said. "I'll be watching, girl."

"Every minute." Her fingers were steel bands on his shoulders. "I wanted you to stay. But now that you're going after Spook—I'm afraid. I don't like it, *caro mio* . . . Dud Creech and Shag Rowel are capable of *anything!* And—they have not been friends . . ."

"Don't you worry, Mona." Wade's strong young arms went about her, folding her close. "And—well, I won't be coming back without the Spook."

"I know," she whispered, lips against his face. "That's why I am afraid—"

Yet, when Wade rode away next morning, her only farewell was a firm pressure of her hand on his arm as he sat his hull; meaningly, he placed his own hand for a brief moment over hers. Nor did he look back as he went slowly up the little valley, pack pony in tow, riding toward the gap where the basin opened, heading upland to the west.

But Mona stood there looking after him until the pass hid him. Then, with an inscrutable glance at Dud Creech, she walked slowly to the cabin. Old Bronc saw her and spat out his quirly stub as if the act was a sort of ritual, then stepped on it.

Shag's ugly face was heavy with satisfaction because he was inwardly gloating. No matter what that Creech jigger had up his own sleeve, *he* had arranged one plumb personal matter —Wade Austin's number was up.

WHEN a young fellow is riding away from the girl he loves, with a very good prospect of not seeing her again, it would seem like his thoughts would lag behind, his mind engrossed wholly with her. But Wade's thoughts, like his clean-cut face, were turned ahead and, like his face, they grew harder with the passing miles.

He was realizing what very likely lay ahead of him before he was done with those two men. Nor was the prospect of settling things in the reek of powder smoke one whit foreign to his taste.

So he rode up the long zigzag trail through rough country, his eyes on the forbidding mesa beyond the last hogback, and his senses were keenly alert, turned for the slightest hint of danger on those timbered ridges or in the dark canyons.

Presently, his thoughts reverted to Mona Terrill, and the wonder of it all. It was as if he had been transported to another world—a world of eternal bliss. He felt she had the same feeling, and their inseparable interests strengthened his resolve to stay on the mesa until he finally settled things with Dud Creech and Shag Rowel.

Then, if the day came when he

should ride away from Thunder Hills and that hidden lair called the Roost, he would not ride alone.

With those thoughts, he made camp at sundown—a wary camp in a hidden barranca gouging deep into the mesa, where the tiny glow of his fire could not be seen save by four-foot prowlers.

He knew the two-foot wolves were licking their chops, but they were not quite ready to close in for the kill.

WADE AUSTIN sighted the red horse late the next afternoon. High on a far-away ridge he stood, staring out across his domain, his harem grazing nearby. With splendid head flung high, ears raised, tawny mane whipping in the breeze, he had strength and endurance, cunning and fighting heart stamped in every detail. The Spook created a picture of defiant challenge which made Wade Austin stand stock-still because of its sheer beauty. The man's breath caught in his throat.

As the lord of the mesa and his mares drifted away, Wade knew that the contest would be long and hard, and grimly bitter. He camped that night in a dry coulee, not far from a waterhole frequented by the stallion, and prepared for the morrow—and the battle of wits, patience and endurance which the dawn would bring forth.

Soon after dusk his body tensed, and he listened. He heard something like a far-off yell, and after that a faint shot in the distance. Then the silence of the high country closed in, keeping its own secrets.

Vaguely troubled, Wade was a long time getting to sleep. He expected Rowel—and Creech—would trail him to make trouble, but that distant shot hadn't entered his calculations.

At last he fell into uneasy slumber, waking every now and then at the slightest sound.

So it was that when the black shadows grew blacker in that last hour before the coming dawn, the hour when night attains its full depth and sleepers lie like the dead, that the stirring of the breeze brought a new sound to Wade Austin's sensitive ears.

Suddenly awake, he sat up in his soogan, tossed off the blankets, and gripped his carbine. The gold stallion, Nugget, was snorting softly, nervously, as was his pack pony. The youth was wondering why this fear had come over them, what its cause was, when suddenly he got his answer.

A vagrant veering of the dawn wind brought the click of a hoof on stone to Wade's ears. A rider was approaching, and he was very close now. Nugget suddenly threw up his head and whinnied. Wade rested upon one knee, rifle held at instant ready, eyes raking the blackness from behind narrowed lids.

"Wade!" came a clear, throaty call. "Where are you?"

With an icy finger playing tattoo along his spine, he lunged to his feet, facing the point of call. Though the breath seemed caught in his throat, he replied.

"Mona! Here! Good God, girl, what—"

"Wade!" came her voice again, and there was a catch in it this time—of relief, fatigue, travail. "Wade! They—they've killed Bronc! Back there—tonight—"

Once more Mona Terrill rode out of the high country shadows into Wade Austin's camp. Once more coming to him, a girl in trouble—but this time the trouble was more serious. He gathered her protectively into strong young arms.

MONA soon told the sordid, ugly story.

It was spun by a weary girl who had ridden a sleek, tired buckskin all night, heading toward her sweetheart's distant camp.

It happened at dusk, she told Wade.

While she and Bronc were pitching camp. A shot from the shadows of a ribbed and painted bluff—a slug which hit Bronc square between the shoulders while he stooped over their fire. She had to drag him from the flames where he'd fell.

It was either Dud Creech or Shag Rowel, of course. Both hated Bronc, as well as fearing him. Both had reasons for wanting him out of the way. Both had very casually prepared to leave the Roost soon after Wade's departure; Creech riding away first, presumably for his place on Demijohn. Shag soon followed, traveling light. Neither could have had any idea that old Bronc and Mona intended to trail after Wade—and themselves—the minute the two men got out of sight.

"Bronc knew as well as I did that they meant no good," the girl said. "I asked Bronc to ride with me. Though he was bad in many ways, Wade—cursed and damned and hated as he was—he was always good to me, did everything he knew how to for me. He was the only father I ever knew; a *mestizo* woman, Indio-Mex, the only mother . . .

"And I kept thinking of him, last night, as I knew him when I was a little girl. Of all the little things he did—how big and kind and understanding he was, under his shell of hard-bitten oneriness which he used to cover up when he felt sorry for me.

"Then to be killed—this way—in the night by a gulcher . . ."

Wade's arms tightened about her. "Cry it out, Mona," he said gently. "You'll feel better then. We'll find out who did this, and then there'll be a payday."

"But they'll try to kill you, too—just like Bronc—" she said against his shoulder. "A man, no matter how brave or canny, can stop a bullet out of the dark—and from behind! I'm—*I'm afraid!*"

Mona straightened up suddenly, shook the tears from her eyes, placed two fierce hands on Wade Austin's shoulders.

"No—*I'm not afraid!*" she said in a hard, level voice. "I buried Bronc by caving a bank in on him. I'll help bury his killer, so help me God! We'll carry on, Wade, you and I! That's what Bronc would want us to do. I know this mesa almost as well as Dud Creech. I know it better than Shag Rowel! Shag—who tried to rib the Roost boys that you were wearing a star next to your skin, even before he knew you were coming up here. Shag—who wants me—and who'll go to any lengths to get what he wants . . ."

"He belongs in hell," Wade said grittingly. "That's were I'm sending him!"

"Dud—he is ambitious that way, too. Yet he's willing to marry. Insists on just that—and soon. I always thought Bronc trusted him too much, or underestimated his trickery—Dud is not clumsy or stupid like Shag. He's a snake, smooth and silent, coiled, waiting . . . and the best shot in the Thunders with a rifle . . ."

Her eyes were close to Wade's. "One of them did it. Which I don't know. But I do know, man of mine, that—that when our job here is finished, and Bronc rests easy in his mesa grave, that I never want to see these hills again. *Never!* They've been part of me, until now . . . part of my blood and very being. I understand the men and the code of them who rode here—hard men, hard riding and rough talkers. A wild, harsh life, perhaps, but the only one I knew until I went outside. It's more savage than civilized."

Suddenly, she stood up in one lithe movement with steely endurance in every line of her, written in every feature of her beautiful face. Steel, and fire, and steadfast determination. . .

"We'll show them, Wade," she fin-

ished with slow grimness. "Match our wits and courage and resource against that pair—*and win!*"

THE sun mounted higher and higher, a molten ball of fire that converted the mesa into an inferno. The tortuous trail wound ever upward, twisting, dipping, veering, climbing, boring ever deeper into wild horse country. Songless birds flitted among the spiny growth; rock wrens scurried to covert among the boulders. The two halted on the crest of a ridge to rest their tired horses, seeking the sparse shade of a gnarled Joshua.

The setting was one of tumbled ridges of lava cut by black gorges; a veil of purplish haze tinged the cliffs, colored the scalloped rims and darkened lonely gorges. Above, the sizzling sun and cloudless, empty sky; below a devil's playground of hot rocks, lava fangs, grotesque pinnacles and mysterious domes that shimmered as if shaken by an earthquake in the quivering, super-heated air.

"Hell's back-yard," said Mona. "The country God forgot."

"No place for women," replied Wade. "Varmint *malpais,* none else."

Most of the previous day they had kept doggo in the barranca camp, the girl catching up on sleep. Just after sundown they'd started, traveling until well past midnight; starting with the dawn once more. A gruelling pace, but one that stood the most chance of checkmating the sinister designs of Creech and Rowel, who'd have scant opportunity of trailing them close or setting an ambush.

Neither Wade nor the girl had seen a sign of the pair.

Mona Terrill made an ideal trail-pard. She was capable, sure, swift thinking and acting. She was very boyish in her khaki shirt, stout levies and sturdy boots, with a narrow-brimmed Stetson atop her tawny hair and a scarf loosely knotted about her tanned throat. A full belt and a holstered, business-like .32 clung to her slim hip.

But there was nothing masculine in the beauty of her face or the redness of her mouth as she rested close to Wade on the hill, staring with puckered eyes across a thousand-foot chasm into the distance. The youthful mustanger's body quivered as he looked at her.

He knew they ought to go back, but he also knew that he would lose the girl by attempting it, or even suggesting the plan. And—perhaps Creech or Rowel expected just that, and lay in wait somewhere along the back-track.

SUDDENLY, Mona sat upright. Across that vast chasm, through the still, thin mesa air came a shrill familiar sound. The challenging whistle of a wild stallion.

"Look!" she said breathlessly. "Look, Wade!" Her fingers dug deep into his arm muscles as he leaned forward, tense, watching.

With almost magical abruptness a large band of mustangs had appeared across the gorge, as if out of nowhere. They made a breathtaking, blood-tingling picture as they stood over there—a medley of blacks and whites, buckskins and pintos.

On the edge of the precipice stood the red stallion, Spook, like a charcoal silhouette against the blue background of the sky, head up, ears cocked forward, body tensed and braced, defiance flaunting from every line.

"The Ghost!" Mona whispered. "Isn't he the most beautiful thing—"

Nugget, head up, ears pointed, shrilled a high challenge across the gorge. Wade grinned. When he'd caught Nugget the gold roan was kingpin of the Guadalupes. Now he stood, statue still, eyes fixed uneeringly on the rimrock where the red Spook stood. The call of the wild and the love of combat were calling, and his love of it clashed strongly with his dumb devotion to a master who

had conquered him, then won his affection by kindness and understanding.

"What a battle that would be!" Mona said under her breath.

"I'd hate to see it come off." Wade shook his head. "Steel shod and double dangerous as Nugget is now, both of them would likely be killed, or maimed so bad they'd have to be shot, and, well—Nugget is my only bet on catching the Spook."

Mona looked at him, sudden savvy dawning in her eyes.

"You—you mean use Nugget to trap Spook?"

"Uh-huh. That was my plan. Now, I don't know. Creech and Shag have plumb complicated things. We can't dodge 'em forever."

"I don't want to," she replied low voiced. The throaty savagery of her words made the youth look at her sharply, but her eyes were fixed upon the distant Spook, her face half-averted.

"I would kill either of them," she finished quietly, "just like I'd shoot a rattler—or a mad wolf. I mean that. Wade!"

CHAPTER IV
Attacked!

STARS still shone palely in the graying sky as the two set out next morning. The game now was getting down to cases. Wade rode his pack pony instead of Nugget whose rigging was stripped except for a hackamore which could be slipped off in a jiffy. All load and provisions save those absolutely necessary had been cached in their last camp near a small spring used by the brooms as a water hole.

The Spook, after hearing and returning Nugget's challenge, would likely stay in the neighborhood until he knew the answer to the strange stallion's presence. He was of the breed that would not tolerate a rival for one second—if Wade Austin knew anything about wild horses. Any day, any hour now, might bring things to a head. He felt it in his bones.

About noon that day, he glimpsed a mounted man emerge from a distant notch, leading a pack pony, and he knew his hunch was correct. Wade put glasses swiftly to his eyes.

It was Shag Rowel!

Mona, seeing him too, met Wade's eyes evenly. "Looks like the wolves are closing in," was her sole comment. But she saw to the loading and firing mechanism of the .32-20 scabbarded under her left stirrup leather.

But what no one of the three saw, was the slim whiplash of a man who watched all of them from a far vantage point through glasses as powerful as Wade's own. He was standing motionless, eyes glued to the binoculars which shrivelled distance to nothing.

It was not with speculation or conjecture that Dud Creech surveyed his vista. He knew its every canyon, ridge and rim; every spider-web trail that led into or through these rock-ribbed hills. Creech, who trailed like an Apache, and was fox smart; who shot the heads off squirrels in far-away, high trees to watch their lifeless bodies hurtle earthward, buffeted from branch to limb.

He lowered the glasses and took the cigarette from his lips. His sooty eyes glowed with a reddish, triumphant fire; his thin lips parted as he smiled. He glanced down at his hand—the one holding the quirly. He opened his fingers, unballing a tight clenched fist.

His grip had put out the fire on the cigaret and Creech chuckled—a sound which would have been an icy finger playing tag along Mona Terrill's spine, if she had heard it.

On the other hand, Shag Rowel displayed no such canniness. His spotting Wade and the girl together, mere specks in the distance though they were, confirmed his suspicions—suspicions of the truth and jealousies born of his own gross nature.

"Knowed she was trollopin' round with him!" Shag muttered thickly. "Ridin' open together, thicker'n thieves—"

Shag, cursing venomously, gigged his mount to a faster pace. Once he lined Wade Austin through his rifle sights. . .

MONA and Wade hadn't finished the cold snack which was their dinner when Nugget suddenly threw up his head and pointed, ears cocked, nostrils quivering. He faced a spot across the twisty valley ahead, where stunty trees showed green against the painted scarp.

Mona and Wade watched from their lair in a cup-coulee. They saw wild horses appear. Then, on a protruding tongue of rock, the Ghost appeared, looking like a distant toy.

A shrill, piercing whistle was answered instantly by Nugget with a strong, blaring retort; angry, defiant. He lunged against his lead rope, lashed out with rear heels. Again and a third time his echoing, raging cry split the quiet of the mesa.

Each time the Spook answered. Not only answered, but descended from his vantage point and started single-footing toward the gold stallion. Mona Terrill, watching breathlessly, saw Wade slip the hackamore from the sorrel stud's head, saw Nugget line away like an arrow and, with a challenging bellow, make toward the Ghost, less than a mile away.

"Wait here," Wade told the girl crisply as he forked his pack pony. "I've got to keep them from fighting, or both'll get killed. Maybe this is the chance I've been praying for—to catch the Spook."

"I won't stay *here,*" Mona retorted determinedly. "But I won't crowd you either, Wade. I'll keep far enough away so's not to bother. Let's ride, cowboy."

They started down the slope into the valley where the two stallions were fast coming together. But before the pair met, just as both slowed to eye each other, a rifle cracked off to the right, in the crags. Wade saw the Ghost squat suddenly, jump, then with a snort wheel and vanish in the scrub. His harem followed suit, disappearing like a mirage.

Cursing tonelessly, eyes blazing, Wade's gaze raked the scarp whence came the shot. The Spook ran like he was creased. And even as Nugget, whistling shrilly, tore out after his enemy and Wade hurried across the basin, the rifle spoke again and rock slivers flew close to young Austin's elbow.

"Damn him!" raged Wade, as he gigged to cover. "First tries to kill the stallion, then me!" And search as he might, he could see no sign of Shag Rowel's holeup on the slope. But behind him a .32-20 cracked once, then twice again. Mona was in action.

Wade waited a few minutes, then spurred ahead. No more shots came from the lair, so he figured the girl had Shag handcuffed, and Wade became wholly absorbed in following the two stallions. Nugget was after the Ghost, trailing the Mustang Mesa stud by the odor which was wafted back to his flaring nostrils.

The grim, pursuing mustanger, guided only by those distant whistlings, trailed them like a bloodhound. The wiry pony kept a tireless pace, seemingly imbued with a desire to witness the impending battle. Mona was somewhere behind.

A GRUELLING hour passed; two. Then Wade suddenly used his rowels on the pony. The sound which came to his ears told him what was about to take place. The Spook had halted his flight, halted—and was coming back to meet Nugget. They would certainly kill each other if that happened.

Wade's bronc slipped and slid on the tricky footing. The youth swung to the ground and scrambled up the pitch on hands and knees, clawing at

bush and root to pull himself along. From the ridge top he saw Spook watching something across a narrow canyon, and then Nugget came tearing from a thicket, making straight for the Mustang stud. The mare cavvy was not in sight.

Whipping out his six-shooter, Wade fired skyward. The Spook whirled, stared wild-eyed for a second, then fled along the hogback away from Nugget. When Wade topped that crest he found Nugget contentedly grazing, satisfied with having put his enemy to rout. The sorrel stud was badly lathered and packed a noticeable limp from pounding the rocks.

Wade staked him, then plunged on along the trail, lasso looped over-shoulder. The spoor was easy to follow, for Spook cunningly stuck to the ridge where he could spy the country below. Time and again Wade caught sight of that red coat and those white stockings as he followed at the fastest pace possible, his heart thudding and breath coming in gasps. His body was soaked with sweat, throat alkali dry.

"If he leaves this ridge, I'm outa luck!" Wade muttered, eyes scanning the ever steepening slopes of the hogback. "If he stays with it, I got a Chinaman's chance to snag him. . ."

On, on, always on, at a killing, heart-breaking pace. The Spook, visibly tiring, stopping often to gaze back, zigzagging uneasily from one side of the crest to the other and ever climbing.

It was almost sundown when young Wade Austin saw that which brought an oath to his parched and cracked lips.

The slopes of the hogback had grown almost to vertical steepness as they climbed, but now it twisted abruptly and Wade could see where the ridge ended in a fissured, vertical wall. The Ghost had snared himself. He couldn't escape unless he doubled back past his pursuer. His only other alternative was to plunge over the rim, which meant certain death.

With lariat coiled in his hand, Wade increased his pace as Spook saw he was trapped. The horse whirled and emitted a terrified snort, eyes glaring, nostrils dilated, ears laid flat back to confront this man-creature who stood squarely in his path, motionless as a statue, waiting. . .

Then, like an unleashed thunderbolt, the Spook voiced a scream of rage and launched himself straight at Wade. A squealing, plunging, crazed, man-killing demon ready to maim and destroy anything in its path.

Loop spinning close to the ground, tensed in the narrow trail. Wade faced that charge with electric muscles and nerves. Not a line of his face changed as he waited, lariat loop writhing like a live thing under a wrist which seemed scarcely to move, as with teeth bared, foam frothing from its mouth, the wild stud leaped at him.

Wade shifted, side-stepped lightly as a dancer; the idly spinning loop flashed up. As it coiled about the red killer's forelegs, Wade Austin suddenly leaned back, dug boot heels into the ground and sent a tiny wave rippling along the lasso. The rope snapped taut and Spook went down with a jarring thud, stunned, all breath knocked out of him.

He fell hard and lay there, too surprised, startled, terrified and shaken to move. The dazing effect of his fall gave Wade just the moment's respite he needed. In a flash he sprang to the stallion's head, caught it, snaked on the hackamore as Spook convulsed his splendid body in a spasm of kicking and squealing. In a moment, his head was cinched down to his trussed forelegs, so that all leverage was taken from the horse's body. Then drawing the pigging rope from his belt, Wade looped the rear legs and drew them taut.

The youth's breath was coming in sobbing gasps, his knees buckled as

he dropped to the ground, caught the Spook's muzzle in a strong hand and held the quivering stallion as quietly as possible while he talked to it in a low, crooning tone.

The clatter of a loosened stone drew his attention swiftly upward. Above the flanking rim of the trail appeared a face and shoulders as Shag Rowel leveled a six-shooter and looked down at Wade, eyes glaring gloatingly and with an evil grin wrinkling his vicious, unshaven visage.

GOTCHA, yuh damned meddler! If yuh savvy any prayers, babyface, yuh better begin recitin' 'em!"

Wade didn't release his hold on the stallion, even when he heard the click of Shag's pistol as the latter eared its hammer back, then carefully descended the cutbank. The Ghost, more frightened by this recent arrival, was struggling desperately to work free; its convulsions jerked Wade this way and that, muscles straining, lips clenched with the effort. Shag, watching the stud's battle, grinned crookedly.

"Mebbe I'd better take that feller off'n yore hands, 'fore cuttin' loose," he said. "He'd git away if I plugged yuh, as is."

Wade's thoughts were racing. He knew he was facing death, and there seemed little he could do about the situation. Shag had the drop, and aimed to kill him. Once before that evening he'd tried to kill him—with a bushing bullet. Now, he couldn't miss with his eyes shut.

"Thought yuh could sneak up here an glom the gal, didn't yuh?" Rowel gloated. "Thought yuh was foolin' folks, you'n her, trollopin—"

Shag's obscenity made Austin's face go white, but he held his tongue even under the flow of the ugly filth. Rowel must have his fill of taunting before sending off his enemy and he made the most of it. When he'd finished, he grated out,

"—an after settlin' with you, feller, I'm takin' the gal, savvy? She mighta *follered* you here—but she'll *leave* with me! With *me*, and like it! I know how tuh bust her hellcat kind, by gawd! Jest like tamin' a *oreaña* brawnk! Haw, haw, haw! Git the Spook an the gal both, alla same time. Reckon my luck ain't clabbered yet —not by a long shot!"

He took a step toward Wade, savagery rampant on his twisted face.

"I got you, guy, an I'm killin' yuh!" he snarled. "But first I'm takin' that red hoss. Hand over that rope."

Wade Austin hesitated but a second. He weighed his chances of drawing against Shag's drop, and found them damnably uneven, but he was determined to die trying, not to be cut down like this. So he handed Shag the rope, as if very, very reluctantly. And Shag didn't notice that it was the short line which would hold Spook's legs as long as it was kept taut. As soon as Wade eased his steely grip on that rope, the loop would go slack.

It happened then, with the swiftness of a finger-snap.

A shrill squeal of rage as the Ghost contorted his cat-muscled body, as Wade's hands let off the hackamore thong that held the stallion's nose toward his knees. There was a flash of red, of white stockings—an instant's moil of threshing hoofs, a nasty thud, the explosion of a pistol and screech of a hurt man . . . and Wade was lying flat behind a boulder, taking dallies with the hackamore rope about a sturdy, twisted scrub bole.

Shag Rowel lay in a sprawled heap, mercifully beyond reach of the flinty hoofs that had flailed him into unconsciousness. He'd forgotten that the kingpin of Mustang Mesa was a man killer. Wade hadn't, and the youth's face was deadly grim as he walked over to Rowel, picked up his pistol and stood looking down at him for a moment.

"Once I drew to an inside straight

—and filled it, Shag," he said quietly.

CHAPTER V
The Breath of Death

THE glow of Mona Terrill's fire, lighted when dusk fell, guided Wade from the tricky hogback trail into the canyon beneath the rise. Spent, dog-weary, fagged in every bone and muscle with his tussle, he rode the limping Nugget into the tiny barranca where the girl waited, watching. They'd kept contact with one another, after dark, by spaced shots of their pistols.

Mona, eyes glowing, lips parted, watched breathlessly. Shag Rowel appeared, hands bound to kak horn and feet tied under his mount's belly, while Wade's pack pony was tied to his saddle. Shag's left arm was in a rude sling. His beefy, ugly visage was pale and drawn with the pain of a smashed forearm and three busted ribs.

Behind him came young Austin, riding his own stallion, hazing the beautiful and nervous Ghost ahead on a long hackamore rope. And the girl's breath released in a long, quivering sigh when she saw Wade was unharmed—and realized the size of the haul he'd brought in.

The Spook was even more beautiful than when seen at a distance. But it was the spectacle of Shag Rowel, battered and safely bound, that held the girl's gaze. Shag, slumped in his hull, snarled wordlessly like a trapped lobo, refusing to meet her sultry, burning eyes.

"You damned murderer!" Mona said between her teeth.

Shag shot a glare at her, quickly shifted his gaze. "What yuh mean, murderer?" he snarled. "I ain't kilt nobody—*yit!*"

"And you haven't fooled nobody—yit!" mocked Mona. "You'll likely change your tune—when you find out what's ahead for you."

"Whatinhell yuh mean? I never teched that hoss ner Austin, neither. They was too fur off. An' *you* was shootin'—much as me, by dam!"

"Her shootin' kept me from being killed," Wade said, motioning the now unbound Shag from his mount. "You've dealt yore last dirty card, Rowel. These hill folk likely have their own way of dealing with bushers."

Shag was uneasy, his piggish eyes darting from Wade to Mona and back again. They ignored him while fixing supper, meeting his queries with silence as he sat huddled against the arroyo bank, nursing his broken arm and easing his smashed ribs. Briefly Wade recounted his story to the girl, whose comments were brief, terse, commendatory.

Chuck finished, Wade tied Rowel's ankles, then roped his midriff to a gnarled piñon near the fire coals. For a long time he and the girl huddled in their soogans, talking in low tones, while the Spook worried at his hobbles and bit at the lariat tethering him, making the night noisy with his snorts and sudden squeals.

The hours wore on; the icy, blue stars twinkled in the crystal-clear night sky. It was one of those high-country nights when sounds carried far on the cold air, and the hidden barranca, which Mona Terrill had so cleverly chosen for their camp, acted as a sort of natural sounding board for any noise eminating from the scarps above. Wade, wholly whipped out, slept like a log; Shag dozed uneasily, often stirring with pain, muttering to himself.

BUT Mona slept lightly, with one ear open, rousing at the slightest sound. So it was that just before dawn she suddenly sat upright, listening intently, wondering what had aroused her.

Both Nugget and the Spook were jittery, snorting softly, fiddle-footing

at their leashes. Puma maybe, thought the girl. The mesa was full of them, but the hour was late for their prowl. In the darkness she could see nothing, but she surely could *feel,* and—she *felt* danger.

Shag, too, was awake, watching her, listening also. Even Wade stirred, his steady breathing ceasing all at once. Then he muttered.

"What is it? Hear something?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "Something woke me, all at once—"

"Stoke up the fire," growled Shag. "No use freezin' tuh death."

"And make a nice target for that skulking *amigo* of yores?" asked Wade. "Deal again, Shaggy!"

"What *amigo?* I rid up here by myself, damn yuh. An' what did yuh mean by sayin' I murdered somebody? Who in hell did I kill, huh?"

"You killed Bronc," Mona cut in savagely, "With a gulching shot in the *back!* We'll see what the other boys down at the Roost have to say about your case, Shag Rowel!"

Shag stared at her with gaping jaw and bulgy eyes. "Kill Brawnk? *Me?* Yer crazier'n nine kinds uh hell! I hain't seen Brawnk sence I left the Roost—ner you either, 'till today!"

Mona regarded him contemptuously, but there was a speculative glint in her veiled green eyes. "Then who did—if you aren't the busher? You tried to kill Wade this afternoon."

"I shot at him tuh skeer him!" yapped Shag. "An' I tried tuh down the Spook. Shore, I done both them things! But I didn't kill Brawnk! I'll swear on a stack uh Bibles I didn't! Yuh can't tote me back tuh the Roost an turn them wolves loose on me fer that! . . . No,—*No*—"

Rowel's voice had risen to a screech. "They'll tie me aback a wild hoss!" he chattered. "Gawd knows *what all* they'll do! I never done 'hit, I tell yuh! Yuh gotta believe me. . ."

"Then who did?" demanded Wade grimly. "You're squattin' on the hot edge of hell right this minute, Shag."

"Not fer that!" Shag gabbled, spilling half the tobacco he tried to build in a one-handed quirly. "Nawsir! I seen another hossman up here spyin' on yuh. Dud Creech. I'd know his cayuse anywheres. If Brawnk was sanded like yuh say he was, well—Dud Creech done 'hit—"

Shag raked a match on his pants, held flame to his clumsy fag. For a moment his fear-distorted face was outlined in the wavering light . . . and the cold morning stillness was shattered by the crack of a rifle.

Shag jerked as if smacked by a fist, his arms relaxing, fingers clawing. His mouth popped open, gasping, as a gurgle rattled in his throat and he doubled forward, body dragging against his bond.

"You—you. . . " He strangled. "Dud—kilt—me—jest like he—did Brawnk. . . Dam' his soul tuh black hell! . . *Git him,* Austin!"

He slumped suddenly, beyond human aid. Dud Creech's slug had caught him just below the throat, and a mocking laugh, cold as the dawn air, drifted down from the barranca rim.

"Hot edge of hell was right, Austin!" came the taunting voice. "You're next. Then I'll take my time attending to that red-headed hellcat living with you!"

But Wade Austin wasn't listening. He'd rolled like a cayuse to his rifle, jerked it to shoulder and loosed three slugs toward the spot where Creech was laired. Mona, swearing between tight teeth, also flung two swift bullets upward before changing position like Wade did. Their fusillade must have come close, for they heard Creech backing off hastily and with no little noise.

Like a panther Wade was off in pursuit. One glance toward the limp Rowel told him that Shag was finished. "I'm taking this side of the

coulee!" Mona Terrill flung after Wade as he scaled the scarp.

"Watch him over there, honey!" she finished. "We've got him in a notched stick. There's just one way he can escape, and—don't let him bush you. Come daylight, we'll settle his hash!"

Wade started to protest but the girl already was lost in the dark, traveling like an Indian. With grim face and tight lips he pressed after the retreating killer, moving silently as a shadow. He too, had noted this stretch of terrain, and knew that Creech could escape but one way out of the close-hedging ridges.

Creech had taken a long chance in creeping up for a shot, and waking the camp had been his undoing. It spoiled his plan to let them build their fire, then drygulch Austin as he did Bronc Terrill. Coldly calculating, he'd weighed his chances; shrewd for all his viciousness, now he knew he was up against it. Any man who could trap both the Spook and Shag Rowel at one time was something else than the kid he'd figured young Austin to be.

"But I'll get him!" Dud gritted, prowling the shadows, cursing when he stumbled, wondering just where his pursuers were.

"Get 'em both, by God! They'll find out what it means to cross Dud Creech!"

SLOWLY the starlight paled, the eastern sky grayed and sent its pallid mantle over the mesa. The black jumble of hills seemed to leap sky-high as they took on shadowy form; a chill west wind beat through the scrub and pinons, cold as the breath of death.

It *was* the breath of death—for the grim old Captain was ready to swing his scythe in the badlands of Mustang.

A rifle cracked far up on the scarp bove Wade. Ahead of him he heard the screech of a bullet high in the air against a rock, followed by a snarling curse from his quarry. Mona Terrill was on the job, Wade reflected grimly. She had the advantage of position now—and she was out to get Dud Creech in the same coldly calculative manner of hunting a rabied lobo.

The young mustanger flitted through that wild wall of hills, hard on Dud's trail as the fleeing man made toward a notched slit that was his sole hope of escape. It was a narrow gash above a towering rockslide, with country dropping sheer away on both flanks.

As the dawn grew stronger, Wade saw a long, deep and barren cleft in the earth below, fissured along its base by holes and caves. Rockslide country hemmed it in, appearing to reach higher and higher against the awakening sky.

Creeping along that tricky rim was Mona Terrill, head bare, rifle held at instant ready, her gaze fixed below where Creech was plunging desperately toward covert as the merciless clarity of dawning day spotlighted him.

Wade caught a glimpse of him far-ahead, darting across a shallow open space and fired instantly. Slivers of rock flew from a rocky elbow near Dud and Wade saw the savage look which Creech flung at him before diving beyond the break. But he couldn't find safety there, for the girl's carbine was cracking again, echoing along the coulees like shattering glass.

Wade started to run, stumbling, harsh breath in his throat, as he saw Creech suddenly plunge down the fissure and stagger toward a cave at its base. Thrice he fired—and three times missed. For Dud was running at a weaving gait, sore pressed, intent only upon reaching that hole in the earth which commanded any approach from the front.

Laired there, he could hold off Wade and Mona so long as his

strength and cartridges lasted. Likely there was water in it, too.

He made it. Made it with a plunge and a hoarse yell of triumph. He snapped two shots at Wade, sending him diving to cover with their closeness. Dud was out of range of the girl, hidden by a bulge of the precipice. Young Austin took all this in as he hunkered behind a boulder and built a smoke with cold-numbed fingers.

He looked up toward her position, but he didn't see her. Nor could he call, for the distance was too great for understanding speech. Now and again Creech fired, his slugs whining off the rock protecting Wade who seemingly was trapped as securely as the Demijohn killer—at least, until darkness brought release.

Presently he saw Mona. She was squatted high above the place where Creech was laired, busied with something on the lip of the rim. From her vantage point she could see Wade; once she waved to him, then a bit later motioned toward him with both hands, shoving palms down.

Puzzled, Wade watched, not understanding. Faintly, he could hear Creech calling out mocking taunts and curses to come and get him; for both of them to tackle him. The grim-faced youth spat toward the holeup, cuddled his rifle closer to his cheek, praying for just a glimpse of the killer.

The first lance of the sun was touching the scarp rim as Mona Terrill again came to the edge, and made a final gesture to Wade with both arms, shoving palms down. Frowning, he stared upward.

His stare froze in wide-eyed savvy as the whole cliffside growled.

Stock-still, breath held, Wade Austin watched the shale begin to move. A slow lurch at first and then the slide began a grinding, rumbling cataract of sound, making the whole earth tremble. The whole slope moved faster and faster like the march of a "highlifed" glacier.

"God!" cried Wade, his mouth and throat dry. "God in heaven!"

The roar became a terrific din; clouds of dust boiled upward, and then it was over, stark silence following the avalanche roar.

Slowly the dust lifted, like a veil. The ravine below, the cave of Creech was gone, rounded up into a bulgy dome by a thousand tons of loose shale. Only the dust cloud remained, hanging in the new morning light like a dirty-red fog on Mustang Mesa.

THEY met at the trail foot far below the crevice and Mona, rifle cradled in a crook of her arm, looked at Wade Austin between slightly lowered lids. Though her face was a little white, it was wholly calm, collected.

"I buried Bronc like that," she said quietly, "and I send Dud Creech to the same sort of grave. *And he knew it!* I never want to see this accursed place again, Wade Austin! Our job is finished."

"Yes," nodded Wade, putting his arm around her. "It's finished."

"You—you don't hate me for it? Think less of me as—a woman?"

"God love you — *No!* Listen, honey—" Wade's voice was even, quiet.

"The less unpleasant things are talked about, or even thought of, makes it better for everybody. What happened back there—that slide and all—there's no need to mention it at the Roost, or anywhere.

"Course, *we* know it happened, but nobody else does. As far as I'm concerned, as far as you're concerned, Mona, from now on we didn't see anything happen—didn't hear anything happen. Will you give me a kiss on that?"

"Like—this?" She kissed him.

And his arms crushed her close to his body.

HEARTBREAK TRAIL

By WESTMORELAND GREY

Bob picked up the Kid and ran for the corner of the house.

Why couldn't he read the love-light in her eyes? Was it the barrier of his past, or was it another girl?

BOB VANDALE finished his oral report. For a moment Bonnie thought that he was going to say more. Her body tensed to warm and delightful vibrations, as he made an involuntary movement toward her, and it looked for a fleeting instant as if the great barrier he had erected between them might break down; as if Bob Vandale might speak what Bonnie knew was in his heart for her.

But she saw him master the impulse, saw his hands drop, and saw Bob back toward the door, his eyes refusing to meet hers. He was again what he had always outwardly been, her efficient foreman.

"I guess that's all I've got to report, Bonnie. I'll be going—unless you've got some instructions for me."

Something inside Bonnie was crying out in dismay. Why must it always be like this? Was the man stone blind? Couldn't he read the truth in her eyes? Couldn't he see that she had all but thrown herself at him ever since he had been here on the Rocking Chair spread?

Bonnie got up from the old, spur-scarred, roll-top desk where the in-

door business of the Rocking Chair had been carried on for generations—by her uncle before her, by her grandfather before him.

Of their own volition, her small, neatly booted feet carried her swiftly to Bob's side. Impulsively her hand sought his arm. She felt his slight tremble at her touch.

"Bob—I just want to tell you what—what a good job you're doing—and how much it means to me—!"

But her eyes were saying so much more than her words. Bob Vandale could not help but read the eagerness, the invitation, in them.

He suddenly seemed to throw off a yoke that had been holding him back. He took her swiftly, hungrily, in his arms. Bonnie could not check the vehement way in which she responded, the rush with which her arms went about his neck, the quick willingness with which she lifted her face toward his.

"Bonnie!" he whispered, his arms tightening convulsively, his lean, brown, hard-shaved face over hers.

Then abruptly he had released her and was resolutely pushing her from him. The barrier was between them again. It was as if Bob was looking at her through bars: he could not conceal the love of her in his eyes, yet he could not reach out to her.

"I—I forgot myself, Bonnie," Bob was saying huskily. "I shouldn't have done that. I'm not worthy—I—I haven't got the right—"

Words of denial became confused and stopped in Bonnie's throat. But before she could stop him, Bob snatched up his hat and marched from the room.

BONNIE sank into a chair. She wanted to cry, but could not. Reared in a man's world, she had been taught that tears were weak and shameful, even in a woman. Now they welled up inside her, but none came forth to relieve her heartache.

The mockingbird in the cottonwood outside the ranch-office window trilled its high-pitched song, but the cheerfulness of its sharp little notes seemed to stab at her this morning. In an unguarded moment Bob had shown his love for her. Another second and a pact would have been sealed; they would have belonged to each other. Now he had withdrawn behind his barrier of grim reserve, more formidably than before.

A horse cantered briskly in from the east pasture and halted at the corral. Bonnie heard the cheery and familiar whistling of a popular tune as gap-bars were dropped and the horse unsaddled. It was Jack Lackey coming in from his nighthawk trick on circle and fresh and high-spirited as though he had spent the night in his bunk instead of the saddle.

Bonnie got up hurriedly and crossed to the wall mirror—the one concession in the Rocking Chair office to the femininity of its present administration. She surveyed her face and carefully erased the troubled signs there. Jack Lackey would come by to speak to her as soon as he had washed up, and she didn't want him to see that she had been grieving.

This being welcome to come into the big house and to speak freely with Bonnie, their boss, was the privilege of every cowboy on the Rocking Chair spread, and it was a privilege that Jack Lackey made the most of. There was a democracy within the aristocracy of the big spread. A democracy that was bred of the huge, feudal cattledom of the time and region. One good cowman was welcome in another good cowman's parlor. And there was not a puncher on the Rocking Chair who was not a good cowman.

Lackey came through the hallway, the sound of his bootheels accompanied by the thin music of his spurs. Then he stood in the office doorway looking at her with admiration in his eyes.

HE was a goodlooking cowboy of about twenty-five. Sleek appearing. His parted hair gleamed, neatly brushed in place. His shirt looked as if it had just come from under the flat-iron. The conches of his soft-leather chaps shimmered, and no trace of range-dust was on chaps or boots.

"Hello!" he called cheerfully and Bonnie had to smile as she started to greet him.

Lackey raised his hand. "Hold it! That pose—just like you are. I wondered if you have any idea how lovely you are, Bonnie? I've got a camera in my mind that saves all these little never-to-be-forgotten pictures of you which I'll keep forever!"

Bonnie laughed in spite of herself. "You've got a liar's tongue in your head, Jack Lackey—but a charming one."

Lackey grinned. "Irish to Irish. You've been as close to the Blarney Stone as I have, mavourneen."

Jack Lackey was a brash young man, but a clever one. His ready flattery was always engagingly cloaked. His challenging black eyes flashed with a restless and hell-careless light. His easy gallantry was heart-warming and Bonnie Pierce found it hard not to like him very much. Indeed, if her love for Bob Vandale had not been such a staunch and solid thing, she might have fallen in love with Lackey. She thought: if Bob only had a tenth as glib a tongue as Jack Lackey's!

Lackey came quite close to her in the cool, shady ranch-office. Outside the mockingbird trilled higher—warningly, it seemed now. Sunlight danced on the dial in the patio beyond the windows.

"There are a lot of things I'd like to say to you, Bonnie. But I know they'd fall on deaf ears. You can't see me for Bob Vandale is always standing in the way."

Some of the cordiality went out of Bonnie's face. "Please don't say them, Jack."

"I'm always obscured by that big, strong, *silent* man." There was irony in his voice.

"I don't like the way you say that, Jack," Bonnie said.

Lackey dropped into a chair. "Do you want Bob Vandale bad enough to be second choice, Bonnie?"

Bonnie leaped up, glared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you were rid of Glenda Boyd—Bob could see *you* then!"

Bonnie's voice went cold. "If you've come to me to lie behind Bob's back—"

Lackey shrugged. "Everybody knows about it but you, Bonnie. It's gossip in town and all over the range."

BONNIE really wanted to cry now. She sank back into her chair, her troubled eyes probing Jack Lackey's face.

Glenda Boyd, a shy, retiring girl, was almost never seen off her tiny nester homestead just north of the Rocking Chair. A strange, troubled-seeming girl, with a kind of haunting blond beauty, hiding herself back there in those timbered hills; a wilderness creature, like some frightened wild animal. This was the girl whose name Jack Lackey was linking with Bob's.

"If Bob Vandale won't tell you about Glenda Boyd—I will," Lackey said, all trace of banter gone now. "You know how I feel about you, Bonnie. And I'll fight for you long as I've got the least chance, fair—or any other way—"

"You never have liked Bob, have you, Jack?"

"And he's never liked me."

"Still—he hired you."

"I'm a tophand rider," Lackey returned simply.

Bonnie nodded. That was true. Despite their dislike for Lackey, nobody could find any flaws in his work.

He was one of the best cowboys on the Rocking Chair spread.

"You don't have to take my word, Bonnie. Ask anybody in Winstead—or anybody on the Rocking Chair. Bob Vandale came to this spread five months ago, didn't he? At that time, Glenda Boyd was living in a miserable log shack on a homesteaded section. Now she owns the section and has a painted pine cabin as neat as the Rocking Chair bunkhouse. Whose money paid for the land, and for the lumber and paint, and hired the carpenter? Banker Collins in Winstead can tell you—if he will. Bob Vandale's. Whose money bought the furniture in it? Who dug the well in Glenda's yard? Bob Vandale, slaving at night, after he'd done his chores on the Rocking Chair.

"And I'll tell you something else. Glenda's nice looking, and not near as ignorant as you'd think, with her backwoods way of living. There's plenty of riders on this spread who'd like to pay her court. But she's—er—posted. Nobody can go to see her but Bob Vandale."

"I don't believe it!" Bonnie said through clenched teeth. But she could not fight down her suspicions. Too many times she had longingly watched Bob ride off in the direction of Glenda Boyd's homestead—nights when his work was done on the Rocking Chair and he could have sought Bonnie Pierce's society. And at times she had wondered if he *could* be seeing Glenda Boyd.

Bonnie wanted to hide her face in her arms, but she was determined to brazen it out with Lackey. But she could not keep the crushed look from her eyes.

Jack Lackey stood up. He was a tall and handsome man. And solicitous. He put his hand gently on Bonnie's shoulder.

"I don't want to hurt you, Bonnie. But you ought to know the truth. You don't have to eat your heart out for a man who's wrapped up in a nester girl. Bonnie—if you ever feel kind of—kind of kindly toward me—I'll be waiting, Bonnie."

"Please—please go now, Jack."

Lackey left the room, his spurs tinkling, but their music sounded hateful and mocking.

A moment later he tiptoed back and looked in at the hall door. Bonnie's face was buried in her arms on the table, and her shoulders moved convulsively. A gleam of satisfaction came into Lackey's eyes and he went silently out of the house.

BONNIE could not stay long in the ranch-office that morning. The place where she had met Bob so many times, where he had made his dry, brief reports while his unspoken words seemed so eloquent, was somehow stuffy and hateful to her now. She wanted to ride. When she was troubled, a ride always helped. In the saddle, with her beautiful line-striped palomino under her, she could always think things out more clearly.

She went out to the saddle shed and took down her own Western saddle. The palomino nodded its head at her from the corral fence, stamping impatiently.

She bridled and saddled the animal, then walked under the long shed to its stall, the palomino following her expectantly. Bonnie had a special little water-proof compartment in the stall where she kept lumps of sugar for the horse. But just as she reached out to open it, she stopped short. Voices came to her from behind the walls of the stall shed.

The palomino prompted her with a nudge but she gave it no heed. The voices were those of Bob Vandale and Jack Lackey—and they were tight, tense voices, freighted with hostility.

Bob Vandale said: "All right, Lackey. Roll your war bag and get

out. Your time's up on the Rocking Chair."

"That sounds funny coming from you, Vandale." Lackey's ironic voice carried hidden meaning, a veiled accusation.

"I told you when you came here," Bob answered patiently, "that you were going to ride square with the Rocking Chair, if you rode for them at all. You haven't done it. If you think I'm gonna stand for you rustling Rocking Chair cattle—you're damned wrong!"

Bonnie was shocked at Bob's accusation of Lackey and gripped with alarm for Bob's safety. Lackey was known as a dangerous, quick-trigger man. A small tense hush followed Bob's words and irresistibly Bonnie was drawn to a crack between the boards of the wall, from where she could see the men. They stood there behind the long building, sharply outlined in the morning sunlight, eyeing each other measuringly. Both men wore guns.

"I knew your record when you came to the Rocking Chair, Lackey. I know you're wanted for stealing horses and cattle over on the Chisos range."

"Still you hired me." Lackey's voice was mocking.

"Still I hired you," Bob affirmed, his voice husky. "But it was part of the pact that you'd ride straight on this spread. You haven't done it. You've been running off Rocking Chair stock. This week you drove off twenty-one head of steers, sold them to a cattle-buyer in Winstead—with my name forged to the bill of sale!"

Lackey laughed shortly. "Suppose I claim you signed that bill of sale, Vandale? No, I reckon I'm not leaving the Rocking Chair just now. Looks like I got a pretty good thing here. I think I'm staying."

Bob's voice went measured and deadly. "The ranch is not big enough for both of us, Lackey!"

Bonnie's hand went to her throat. She wanted to go out to Bob, but something bade her wait. Bob stood tense as stretched wire, while Lackey appeared almost negligent, unconcerned as he always seemed.

"What're you going to do about it, Vandale?" Lackey seemed unable to keep amusement from his voice.

"I'm taking you in to the sheriff at Winstead."

"You won't do it, Vandale. *You haven't got the guts!*"

Bonnie's heart was pounding in her throat. She saw Bob's gaze, riveted on Lackey, waver a little. A kind of hopelessness was in his eyes. Lackey glared into Bob's face, and with a look of disgust on his own he hissed: "A coward can't run a bluff. Suppose I speak out and tell what I know—about that killing in Del Rio—about *Brazos Morgan—!*"

Bob looked as if he had been quirted in the face. He took a threatening step toward Lackey, and Bonnie throttled a scream in her throat, as Lackey's hand went swooping toward his gun-butt. Her breath caught achingly somewhere in her chest as she saw Bob's lightning, panther-like spring, and the great smashing blow he drove at Lackey's face. Lackey sprawled on the ground, scrambling about to stare at Bob's wrathful towering figure over him, blood trickling from his bruised lip. She saw Lackey's hand dart back to his holster, and his gun gleamed in his hand.

Probably she cried out to Bob. Bonnie didn't know. But certainly Bob never heard her. He took one stride, gave a kick—and sent Lackey's gun skimming across the hard ground, its hammer not yet drawn back.

Lackey got slowly to his feet, while Bob stood stiffly glaring at him, his normally brown face white with anger.

"You're banking on my being a coward, Lackey. And you think you've got my hands tied. All right,

maybe you have. But one more crooked trick—and I'll untie 'em! And another thing. You keep away from Bonnie. You—you try to rope her in and I'll show you up—and by God—nothing can stop me!"

Then Bob turned his back on the man, strode out of Bonnie's view, and the next moment she heard the beat of hoofs as he rode away. She saw Lackey stare wickedly after him, mop his lip with his handkerchief, walk over to retrieve his gun, then make for the bunk-house.

Bonnie crouched weakly there in the palomino's stall for a long time. At last, still bewildered, she led out her horse and rode dazedly from the corral.

All that morning she rode, sick with suspicions of the man she loved. What did Lackey mean when he spoke of *that killing* back in Del Rio? Why had Bob allowed a rustler to work here on the Rocking Chair? Were these things part of the grim barrier Bob kept building between himself and her? And why had Lackey called him a coward, when Bob had shown in those few electric seconds that there was no fear in him?

SOUTHWARD, on another part of the range, Bob Vandale was riding. And his thoughts were no happier than Bonnie's. He was going toward Cottonwood Creek to look over the herd there. It was part of his job as foreman here, and he was doing it from sheer habit, hardly realizing what he was about.

It was always like this when tragedy hovered over you, pressed you down. You automatically did commonplace, everyday things with your hands, while circumstances were tearing things out of your insides by the roots.

Bonnie. His empty arms ached for her, thrilled to the remembered feel of her body in that overpowering moment he had held her close. But he could not go to her and claim her in the way he desired to—more than anything else in the world; the way he felt she wanted him to claim her.

He could not do that, knowing the time might come at any moment—and it seemed possibly very soon—when disgrace would come on him and show him to be despicable—no, not in her eyes.

A charge of cowardice over him! That was one thing a man could never try to explain away, no matter how unjust the charge was. You were beaten at that game before you started. He shuddered as he thought of those black days back on the Del Rio range, when people had turned against him and he had tried to explain, and his explanations had only turned them more against him. Now the thing was coming here to haunt him, to tear down the new life he had tried to build so staunchly on new and solid ground.

Jack Lackey. Outwardly debonair, clever, happy-go-lucky. Inwardly treacherous, calculating, scheming. Playing both ends against the middle here on the Rocking Chair. Bob suspected the man hoped to promote himself into a marriage with Bonnie—and her fine Rocking Chair spread.

Bob knew he had been a rustler—yet the man had blackmailed him into silence. Lackey had been Jack Lacey down on the Chisos, wanted for stealing stock. Yet he rode among honest men here, respectable by merely inserting a *k* in his name, and was again up to his old tricks!

Bob was checkmated. For Lackey knew Bob's past too. A word from Lackey, twisted as only Lackey could twist it—and Bob's old disgrace would close in on him here, as ugly for people to see as it had been in Del Rio.

And now Lackey had broken his rigidly given promise. He had rustled Rocking Chair steers—stolen from Bonnie Pierce. Bob had but to

think of those last days in Del Rio to know how tightly his hands were tied against exposing the man. But there was one thing he could do about Bonnie's loss—and he made up his mind then and there to do it.

There were other things he could do too. Determination deepened the strong lines of his face, and his eyes took on a resolute glint. He could keep on trying to right some of the wrong which he had unwittingly caused. He could keep doing his job here on the Rocking Chair with all his might, as long as it was given him to do.

He took new courage from the thought, straightened in the saddle and looked ahead across the range. He spurred his horse and rode on southward along the twisting trail.

WHEN Bonnie returned to the Rocking Chair ranch-house, she saw Bob's horse hitched at the bar in front. He had returned ahead of her. She found herself suddenly dreading to see him now. She'd like to have quelled all her doubts about him before facing him. But her heart held a small hope that he would make some explanations to her.

He was waiting in the ranch-office for her. He straightened his shoulders resolutely as she came in, but she saw the tremendous effort that it took.

She sensed that there was more than a barrier between them now. It seemed almost as if two strangers were speaking to each other from across a great gulf. And this was the man who had held her in his arms this morning!

Bob cleared his voice twice before his husky words came out. "Uh—I sold twenty-one head of Rocking Chair steers the other day," he said. "Calhoun in Winstead wanted them and offered a fair price. So I took him up for you. Uh—here's the money."

He laid a pad of bills on the desk.

"But Bob—?" Bonnie queried. "Why didn't you put it in the bank, the way you always do—?"

He wouldn't look at her! He mumbled: "I—I wanted to give you this money personal," and he started for the door.

Bonnie wanted to run after him, stop him and demand explanation. But she was constricted, and only stared after him as he went out through the hallway. Was she afraid of the truth?

She picked up the money without interest in it. They were not new crisp bills of large denomination such as you would expect a cattle buyer to pass out, but old, rumpled, worn ones of small denomination—the kind a man would have if he had been carefully saving for a long time.

THAT afternoon the Yucca Kid rode up to the Rocking Chair ranch-house. He was not much more than a button, probably sixteen, but the mark of the owlhoot trail was on him. And he rode as a man does who is but two jumps ahead of a posse. His small, smooth face was hard, twisted in a perpetual leer of hate. The devil was in his blue eyes—a brittle, menacing, relentless light. The Yucca Kid looked like one who had been hurt by the world, and hurt badly—while yet too young to understand. The dust of long riding was on his clothes. His horse was lathered and heaving. He was weighted down with two heavy .45's, grotesque when worn by one so slim and youthful.

He halted at the hitch-bar and yelled a defiant, "Halloo!"

Bonnie appeared at the front door of the house.

"I'm looking for the foreman of the Rocking Chair spread!" the Yucca Kid cried belligerently. "A hombre that calls hisself by the name of Bob Vandale." The Kid spoke the name contemptuously as he swung down from the saddle.

"Why, yes. I'll see if I can find him. Won't you come in?"

"No'm," the Kid answered. "I'm waitin' here."

Then Bonnie saw Bob Vandale coming around the corner of the house. Bob took one glance at the Yucca Kid—and he looked like he was seeing a ghost! He hesitated—then moved toward the Kid, so reluctantly that it looked as if invisible hands were pushing him from behind. Bob and the Kid stood facing each other—ten feet apart—out there in the front yard.

"Here I am, Kid," Bob said quietly.

The Kid stared Bob up and down, from head to foot. The utter contempt, the stark hatred in his face, was hideous.

"It took a long time, this time, Morgan," the Kid purred. "Guess you thought I'd given up, huh? It was a tough job cuttin' sign on you again after you welched out on me at Laredo. Reckon you thought I wouldn't find you, huh?"

Bob Vandale sent one pleading glance toward Bonnie there in the shadow of the porch, then turned back to the Kid. "I wasn't running from you, Kid. I've looked for you too. I wanted to talk to you."

"Talk!" the Kid snarled. "I didn't come to talk, Morgan—and you know it. I come to *kill you*. And it's got to be a hurry up job. Reckon there's a posse pretty close on my back trail. I'm ready now, Morgan—*draw!*"

The Yucca Kid fell into a gunman's crouch. Ugly killer-light glittered in his eyes. Bonnie, watching, felt shocked that one so young could look so evil! His small hands hovered over the butts of his low, thonged-down guns. Bob Vandale spread his hands away from his gun, made no other move.

"I'm waiting, Morgan," the Kid's voice was cold and deadly. Then he flared. "Draw, damn yuh—or I'll shoot you down in your tracks!"

Slowly Bob Vandale raised his hands. "I'm not drawing, Kid."

The disgust in the Kid's face was an ugly, working thing. Slowly a cheated expression shone in his eyes. "I ought to gun you down where you stand!" he snarled.

Then his voice broke sobbingly, his hands twitching on the butts of his guns. "It's always like this. How can a man kill a hombre who's too cowardly to ever draw his gun!"

Vandale said: "I'll never draw against you, Kid."

THE Yucca Kid stood staring bitterly for a moment. Then a sharp rush of sound broke the tableau—the hoof-beats of a horse running along the lane toward the ranch-house.

The Kid whirled, like a wild animal trapped. Both of his guns came out.

Bonnie Pierce recognized the rider as a deputy from Winstead. She saw his badge gleaming in the sunlight, heard his warning shout roll across the ranch-yard.

"Shuck your guns and get up your hands, Yucca Kid! Make a move and I'll drill you!"

The Kid made a move, a fool-hardy one. Both his big guns blazed, their bellow beating against Bonnie's ears.

The Kid's fusillade missed the deputy but sent his horse crashing to the ground. The deputy scrambled to one knee, lifted his gun and poured shots across the fence at the Yucca Kid. Bonnie saw the Yucca Kid go down, still futilely firing his big weapons. She saw his youthful body recoil from the vicious impact of slugs.

When the Kid lay sprawled on the ground, the deputy turned hurriedly for a moment's attention to his struggling, mortally wounded horse. Then Bob Vandale acted. Bonnie Pierce watched him with almost incredulous eyes. Bob leaped to the Kid's fallen figure, picked it up as easily as if it had been a shock of oats, whirled and

ran for the corner of the house with it.

A yell and an oath came from the deputy. His gun roared and waspish bullets dug into the ground at Bob's heels. But he did not slow. He ran on, disappeared around the house. Furious, the deputy vaulted the fence and ran limpingly across the yard. He stopped at the angle of the house, fired until his gun was empty, cursed and leaned against the wall to reload it.

A clatter of hoofs arose from the corral and Bonnie reached the deputy's side in time to see Bob, holding the Kid's body in the saddle, go racing in a cloud of dust for the maze of thickets out in the northwest.

"Something's gone loco, Miss Bonnie," the deputy said in a disbelieving voice. "Never thought I'd live to see the day Bob Vandale would side with a killer and outlaw like the Yucca Kid!"

FOR two hours the deputy combed the brush in widening circles around the Rocking Chair. But he did not cut sign on Bob Vandale or the wild button who called himself the Yucca Kid. At last he rode off for Winstead, grim-faced, with the avowed intention of returning with a "hellacious" posse to rake the range "till hell wouldn't have it."

Bonnie was saddling her palomino to hunt for Bob when she saw him riding across the east pasture toward her.

He drew rein, but did not dismount. He said, without looking at her: "I'm resigning, Bonnie. I'm leaving the country."

"Get down off your horse," Bonnie commanded.

Bob obeyed, stood rigidly before her. She caught both his arms firmly, forced him to meet her gaze.

"You know you don't have to run because you helped that Kid outlaw, Bob. The law here will overlook that."

"I'm not running on account of that. Things have come up that make it impossible for me to do my job for you or stay on the Rocking Chair. I hope you can get another foreman—better than I've been."

"How about putting Jack Lackey in your place?" She was trying to break his reserve.

Bob winced. "I wouldn't advise it, Bonnie. Don't—don't trust him an inch!"

"But he knows cows and he's one of the best riders on the Rocking Chair. He's got all the specifications of a good foreman."

"Not *all* the specifications, Bonnie," Bob answered cryptically.

Her earnest eyes searched his face. "Bob . . . why don't you tell me? Why don't you explain? If there's a wrong you've done in the past, surely you've lived it down by now. Hard as I'm trying to keep my faith in you—don't you think I could understand—and forgive? I—I have to say it, Bob—though you know it—I love you. Maybe I could forgive your condoning rustling—even your seeing Glenda Boyd. Bob—who is *Brazos Morgan?*"

Bob's eyes flickered. "You—you know about Brazos Morgan—? He's a man you've got to forget you ever heard of, Bonnie. A man who's despised by everybody that knows him!"

Then he was in the saddle and riding away. He goaded his horse into a gallop and Bonnie watched hopelessly as the gathering dusk swallowed him.

BONNIE wanted to fight, to beat something with her bare, clenched fists. She wasn't the kind of girl to suffer supinely. But what was there for her to come to grips with? A shadow, a sinister phantom threatening her life's happiness, but which eluded her grasp every time it appeared.

Then a thought popped in Bonnie's

mind. Glenda Boyd! If Bob had been as attentive to her as Jack Lackey insinuated—she'd know something about the trouble that was riding Bob. Bonnie got into the saddle and jabbed her surprised palomino sharply. She'd face that recluse-like backwoods nester-girl and get the truth out of her!

It was a long trail and a tough one. Darkness descended while she drove the palomino on. Once across the north line of the Rocking Chair range, the character of the terrain took a decided change for the worse. Bonnie followed a rocky trail crowded with chaparral and catclaw.

At last Bonnie could see the light of Glenda Boyd's cabin through the trees. But as she approached the clearing she suddenly halted the palomino and peered intently through the murk. A horse had whickered a little ahead of her on the trail.

Gradually her eyes made out the animal, in the heavy shadow beside a clump of dense brush. Beside the animal stood a man. A man who must have been spying on the cabin.

A tense, guarded voice ordered: "Ride ahead circumspect. Who are you?"

Bonnie wished for a gun, but she worn none. "Wh-what do you want?" she returned.

"Oh, you—Bonnie?" A match flared against the blackness and lit up the face of Jack Lackey. He pinched it out and came to meet her.

"I wouldn't go to that cabin, Bonnie—there's gonna be a ruckus maybe. And besides you might see something that—that wouldn't be good for you."

"Who's up there?" She tried to hide her new fear and distrust of the man.

"Well, for one thing your good, loyal, true lover, Bob Vandale. He's leaving the country—and the Boyd girl is going with him. But—there's something else in that cabin that interests me—"

So Glenda Boyd was leaving with Bob! That was why Bob quit and was running. Bonnie's eyes snapped. The girl shouldn't have him! No matter what Bob had been or done, Bonnie was going to stop him. She jabbed spurs to the palomino, leaped it past Jack Lackey and galloped up the trail.

She swung from her saddle and ran across the clearing. She recognized Bob's mount and pack horse standing near the cabin. She also saw a team hitched to a buckboard and the bed of the buckboard was padded with blankets and quilts. She looked back and saw Jack Lackey running after her. He made no attempt to stop her but was only a few steps behind her by the time she reached the cabin steps.

The door flung open and Bob Vandale stood in it. Light from the cabin fell full on Bonnie's figure.

"Bonnie—! You shouldn't have come here!"

"Never mind that!" Bonnie said grimly and pushed into the room.

GLENDA Boyd was standing across the room looking at Bonnie, frightened as a startled doe. She *was* a beautiful girl, Bonnie thought, with a wealth of hair the color of a canary's breast, a fair, smooth face and large, dark, troubled eyes.

Then Bonnie saw something else. A cot in the corner, with a still, slender form on it. She recognized the Yucca Kid, his pale, youthful face now cleared of its hard, vicious lines.

"He's—he's dead?" Bonnie asked, a catch in her voice.

"No. He'll live," Bob answered. "But he's lost a lot of blood. He's still unconscious."

Then Bob saw Jack Lackey towering over Bonnie's shoulder. A bleak light glimmered suddenly in Bob's eyes. "You, Lackey? A vulture sights prey quick, don't it?"

"It's handy that you've got a buckboard ready—seeing the Yucca Kid's

condition," Lackey returned in his cocksure voice. "You meant to carry him out of the country in it—but I'm using it to haul him to Winstead. There's a thousand dollar bounty on him for killing that deputy in Laredo. I'm gonna collect it."

There was a gun in Lackey's hand as he stepped from behind Bonnie and said contemptuously: "Don't make any funny moves—like going for your gun, *Brazos Morgan.*"

"You're banking a lot on the idea I'm a coward, aren't you, Lackey? You got the drop while Bonnie's body shielded you. But you're not turning the Kid in. Half a dozen words from me and the sheriff will ride you back to the Big Bend. They still hang men for rustling down there."

"A grandstand bluff, Morgan—"

"No—it's showdown, Lackey—if you try to move the Yucca Kid."

All show of his usual nonchalance left Jack Lackey. Bonnie Pierce was looking at a different man than she had seen in him before. A sinister, deadly man. A predatory one. Just as Bob had called him—a vulture. He leveled the gun on Bob.

"All right then, Morgan, it's showdown—! I'll start my part right here—where Bonnie and Glenda can hear what a fine hombre you are! Or maybe you want to tell 'em. Tell 'em about Brazos Morgan, the *brave* man who shot down Old Buck Boyd, unarmed and in cold blood, because the old man made one little mistake—while he was driven nearly crazy by hard luck—took a few head of steers from a rich spread. Tell Glenda that you're not the benevolent distant relative you've been parading as—but Brazos Morgan, *the skunk who killed her father*—shot him down in cold blood!"

Bob's look toward Glenda Boyd was stricken, pleading. "I'm—I'm sorry, Glenda. I wanted to help you—I'd brought so much onto you and Buddy—"

Glenda looked straight at Bob. An inner proud light was in her face. She spoke to him, as though the others were not there. "I've known it for a long time, Bob. I let you go on believing I didn't know, because it—it seemed to be relieving your remorse. "I've forgiven you, Bob—a long time ago."

"All right!" Lackey's voice became nagging, high-pitched, raspy. "Then tell Bonnie about the murder of old Buck Boyd, so cowardly that the folks on the Del Rio range took your deputy's badge off you, turned against you, drove you from the range. Tell her how little Buddy Boyd, old Buck's little button, went wolf-mad and started gunning for you. Turned outlaw because the law murdered his old man—who the Kid was crazy about—murdered him without no show. Tell her how you changed your name, hellishly ashamed of your real one. How you run from the Kid, backed down every time he faced you. No, Brazos Morgan—you won't turn me in. Cowards always back down in a showdown!"

BONNIE looked at Bob. His face was bitterly defiant, his eyes smoky. And this was the man she'd thrice heard called a coward! Bob was saying: "I'm not backing down this time, Lackey!"

Then Bob's hand leaped to his gunbutt—with Lackey's gun already staring him in the face! Both shots thundered out at once, Bob's hand at his hip exploded into smoke and flame, just as Lackey's bullet smashed him high in the left shoulder. Bob's slug tore Lackey's gun from his fingers, left his hand mangled, dripping blood.

Bob holstered his fuming weapon. He walked grimly toward Lackey who stood gripping his wrist, cursing, his face ashen.

"Get me a rope, Glenda," Bob said.

The girl found one and brought it to him. She helped him bind Lackey's arms to his sides. Out of mercy more

needed than deserved, Glenda bandaged Lackey's wounded hand. "Outside!" Bob ordered, tight-lipped, and prodded Lackey from the cabin.

Bob returned in a few moments. "He's on his horse, bound." Bonnie saw Bob look about the cabin. "Guess I better speak my piece—then get going. You can do what you want about Lackey, Bonnie. You can give him over to the sheriff and tell him Lackey's Jack Lacey from the Chisos—or you can turn the skunk loose. But don't *trust him.* Only thing I ask, is hold him like he is until Glenda and me can get the Kid away. The Kid ain't bad inside—and he deserves a break."

Bonnie was too choked inside to speak. She nodded. Bob went on huskily: "I want you-all to know about Buck Boyd's death, back on Del Rio range. I rode out to his little place to talk to him. I was a brash young deputy and I knew about him taking the XRT steers—and I knew also he'd been driven nearly crazy with hard luck and trouble. Buck was nailing some boards on his horse-shed when I rode up. The sun was low—and in my eyes. I said, 'Boyd, I've come to talk to you?' He turned and his hand went down to his holster. Reckon I was too quick on the draw. Next thing I knew my gun was smoking in my hand and Buck Boyd was lying dead out there on the ground. It wasn't till I got down and examined him that I learned he didn't have a gun. The thing he had stuck in his holster was the hammer he'd been nailing on his shed with."

He sunk in a chair and both girls sprang forward to bandage his shoulder. There was pain in his eyes but they knew it was not caused by his wound.

"Then Buddy Boyd—the one that became the Yucca Kid—ran out and commenced cursing me and threatening to kill me. The whole country turned against me. So I changed my name and drifted, trying to find some peace. But I had marked Buddy and Glenda here as offsprings of a rustler. Glenda disappeared on account of the disgrace. The Kid became a boy outlaw. I wanted to so something for them. Finally I found Glenda where she'd hid out here. I told her I was some sorta distant cousin—so she'd let me help her. But I could never do anything about Buddy. He wouldn't let me. Wanted to kill me every time our trails crossed."

Glenda's gentle glance went to where the Yucca Kid lay so still on the cot. "He'll feel differently about you, Bob—after I've explained everything—what you've done for me and wanted to do for him—"

Bonnie squared her shoulders. She was intruding here. Glenda and Bob were going away together, to take the Yucca Kid, Glenda's brother, to where he'd be safe from the law. Bonnie felt spent, her life suddenly empty, as she turned toward the door.

"Wait!" Glenda Boyd said.

She gave a tremulous smile and looked from Bonnie to Bob. "I don't know whether you love Bob Morgan as much as I do. But I *know* he loves you, Bonnie—and not me. Buddy and I will go alone. We—we can make it just fine—"

Glenda's voice choked and she turned to bend over the cot. Bonnie's heart was suddenly full for this brave, troubled girl. She swiftly crossed and put her arms about Glenda's shoulders.

"You and Buddy will stay here. We'll fight for him, get his life straightened out! He's too young to be very bad—and when the Rocking Chair outfit fights for anybody, it nearly always wins."

Bonnie turned to Bob then. No barrier stood between them and she went bravely to him and he put his good arm about her.

"Bob, Bob—! You didn't have to ride that heartbreak trail all alone."

A Glamorous Novelette of The Border Country

BORDER

Tom Garret held his breath as he watched her.

She taught her lawman sweetheart that love and faith are greater weapons than flaming lead and smoking six-guns

CHAPTER I
The Dance of Love

SPECIAL Border Patrolman Tom Garret was astonished. Never before in all his experience had such a sight met his eyes, and he had seen many strange things along that invisible line which marked the boundry of Mexico and the United States of America.

He sat his horse on the mesquite-clogged trail that wound upward through Tres Arroyo and stared with

SWEETHEARTS

By
WILLIAM
FREEMAN
HOUGH

She was so enrapt in her wilding dance that she didn't see Tom.

wonder and growing admiration. They had told him in Chico that if he wanted any washing done he'd have to take it to Shiela Blangy in Tres Arroyo. Shiela lived with her uncle in a little cabin half way up the arroyo and did all the laundry in that section. Cleg Blangy had a herd of sheep.

He could see the cabin and the black kettle with the stack of cut greasewood beside it. But the sprite who cavorted in the flat, sandy open space before the cabin was no wash-woman. He gripped the saddle horn with both hands and leaned forward to peer through the brush.

Mostly he saw just a blur of white legs and arms, but in those moments when the wild tempo slowed he glimpsed a small, smooth face beneath a wealth of floating hair. Her bare feet seemed to scorn the white sand of the clearing as she leaped and twisted in sinuous rhythm.

She wore an old mantilla, and when she whirled it swam out revealing the whiteness of her skin; and when she snapped small fingers the scant covering threatened to fall entirely from her body.

Tom Garret held his breath as he dismounted and advanced to the very edge of the thicket. This was no child at play; those slim, white legs were nicely rounded; and, when as a part of the dance she assumed a haughty attitude, moved forward with head thrown back, gently molded breasts lifted above the hand that clutched the old mantilla to her bosom.

There was no music; none was needed. The girl went through the graceful movements of a Spanish dance, changed to the faster, fiercer tempo of the Apache without losing a step or faltering in the least. It was a marvelous exhibition of skill and natural grace. White teeth gleamed and blue eyes were bright. And that smooth, white body made breathing difficult for Tom.

The dance finished in a dervish whirl with the mantilla fringe swishing. She came to her bare knees, head bowed and brown hair floating like a shimmering curtain before face and breast. Then, with a little laugh, she ran toward the wings of her small stage, wings formed by thick brush behind which stood her audience. Tom took one backward step and opened his arms. She ran into them.

He meant only to save her from stumbling over him, but somehow his arms tightened about the slim, white shoulders. Her face was close to his, eyes wide and frightened. He saw the swift pounding of pulse in her white throat, felt the rise and fall of her breast; then swift redness swept up the white column of throat and she threw herself backwards against his arms.

"I—I'm sorry," he muttered. "I just meant to save you from falling." He let his arm fall but his eyes never left her face.

"Who are you?" She was gathering the mantilla closer about her slim form, clutching at it with trembling fingers.

"My name is Garret. They told me to come here with—"

"Oh! Garret, the—the new man." Without another word she whirled and raced for the cabin beyond the clearing, vanished behind the door.

TOM wet his lips and reached for the reins of his horse. Slowly he advanced from the thicket edge and into the clearing. Here he stood gazing about him, conscious of the drabness of the place, this scrubby home half way to the top of Tres Arroyo. With the girl gone from sight all the color had vanished. It was a dry, desolate, heat-ridden place. Certainly not the proper surroundings for a girl who danced like one possessed and who had a face and figure not appreciated by snakes and lizards.

He gazed at the blackened kettle near the piñon tree, at the wash tub and rubbing board. Somebody did washing here, no question of that, but surely it wasn't the girl he had seen. Some older woman perhaps; a sister maybe. But they hadn't mentioned but one woman. His glance shifted to the cabin and saw the girl in the doorway. She was dressed in a worn but clean

calico gown and was smiling at him.

"I was looking for Shiela Blangy," he said after clearing his throat. "They told me to bring my wash here."

"I'm Shiela Blangy," she said and stepped across the narrow porch. Her feet were still bare.

"But—" he began to protest.

"And I do the washing." She seemed quite composed although there was still a hint of red in her face.

"Oh. Well—look here, Shiela, I didn't mean to see something I wasn't supposed to."

She looked at her feet and then up at him. "That's all right, Tom Garret. When I'm not washing I like to dance."

"Where did you learn it?"

"Once when Uncle Cleg took me with him across the Border I saw some of it at a hacienda down there. The rest is—I just make it up."

"You do it fine, Shiela. But bending over a wash tub—"

"Oh, I have to wash," she said quickly. "We're very poor and need the money." She spoke frankly, as though it was common knowledge, something he should know. "Uncle Cleg has just a few sheep and sometimes we have to buy water on the other side."

He looked at her small hands, saw the marks of washing on them. This was all wrong, he knew. Those hands weren't meant to grip wet clothes and rub them up and down a board. As a matter of fact the whole picture was wrong—this girl in such a place. What was the matter with this Cleg Blangy that he didn't realize it?

"You brought some wash?" she prompted.

"Oh, yes." He untied the bundle back of the saddle and held it out. "No hurry, though."

"But I could do it now if you'd wait. The sun drys things very fast."

Tom really wanted an excuse to stay longer, but somehow he didn't relish the sight of her bent over a tub washing his things.

"No hurry," he repeated. "I'll come back tomorrow." He thought she looked disappointed. "I can pay you in advance," he said.

"No." She placed his bundle on the porch, and went back into the cabin and came back immediately with a gourd filled with cool water. Their hands touched when she handed it to him. Her eyes dropped again to her bare feet. "You're the second new man this season," she murmured.

"Yes, and I hope the last. I'm sort of a special patrolman, sent over here to see if I can't stop the smuggling. I suppose you know all about it?"

"Uncle Cleg speaks of it now and then."

"And he, like all the rest of them in this section, is against fellows like me?"

"Oh, no! Uncle Cleg says it's dangerous to try and smuggle. He says he'd rather herd a few sheep."

Tom eased down to the top step and supped cool water from the gourd. His eyes, lifting above the rim of it, fastened on the west top of the arroyo where heat waves lifted like shimmering curtains. He thought he caught a glimpse of a movement up there, but wasn't sure. With unconscious grace Shiela sank down beside him.

"Did you ever look into a pool of clear water?" he asked abruptly.

"Why, yes," she replied.

"Then you know how pretty you are." He saw her bare toes wiggle with embarrassment. "Or don't you?"

"I don't know, Mr. Tom."

"Just Tom will do. . . . How old are you, Shiela?"

"Seventeen, so Uncle Cleg says." Her knees bent toward him as she shifted slightly. "Have you seen many pretty girls, Tom?"

"A few," he admitted, "but none so pretty as you."

"I'd like to see some things out-

side," she said wistfully. "It gets tiresome here. I only get to go to Chico now and then." It was sheer impulse that made her lay a hand on his arm. "Someday, if we can save up enough money, we're going someplace away from the Border. Uncle Cleg has promised me that."

"But you will ruin your hands if you continue to do washing."

"Oh, I don't mind washing."

Tom's pulse was pounding. "I was wrong about you being pretty, Shiela. You're—beautiful." Then he caught himself and remembered he was a Border Patrolman.

Shiela Blangy was gazing at him seriously. The fact that he was a stranger made no difference to her; he represented her dreams of hope and the outside world. He was cleaner than most men she had met. Although he had seen her in the clearing, seen her as no other man ever had—that was forgotten. He said things to her that pleased her, nourished her starved soul.

WHAT might have passed further between them was checked by the appearance of two men who rode down the arroyo to the cabin. One rode a big roan horse and Tom recognized him instantly as Al Crulman, proprietor of Chico's main saloon, gambling den and dance hall. He was a tall man with very black eyes and hair. Always freshly shaven, his face had that blue-black complexion. The other man rode a burro. He was small and bent like the twisted stump of a dead sage, but his eyes were shrewd and bright. They began talking as they neared the steps.

"You'll have to get those sheep into better condition before I'll buy 'em, Cleg," said Al Crulman. "They need more water."

Cleg Blangy tugged at his gray mustache. "Reckon I'll have to herd 'em across the line to that water hole. Hate like sin to do it, though."

Though new in the country, Tom Garret had catalogued the citizens carefully, and right now he couldn't understand any reason why a saloonkeeper should want to buy sheep. Apparently the two men had been up the arroyo looking over Blangy's band. This being so, who was the party he had glimpsed at the west rim of the arroyo? Some Border loafer watching Shiela dance? The thought disturbed him.

"Well, Garret, I see you found the place." It was Al Crulman speaking again. He dismounted and strode to the porch. "Best little washwoman along the Border, eh Shiela?" He reached down and pinched her cheek. Cleg Blangy sat his burro nodding industriously, apparently pleased at the attention given his niece by the big man of Chico.

"Yes, sir," continued Crulman. "Shiela has washed clothes for all the patrolmen who have come to this district. They come and go, you know, come and go."

"So I've heard," Tom said.

Crulman turned back to his horse. "Want to ride in with me Cleg? I'll buy a drink and we can talk some more."

They passed out of sight down the trail and Tom turned to the girl. "I'll have to be going, too." He hesitated. "Shiela, will you dance again for me sometime?"

Her answer was so low he could scarcely hear it. "Yes, Tom, when you ask it."

CHAPTER II
Death's Prelude!

IT was but half a mile from the cabin in the arroyo to the one street of Chico. As Tom rode on toward the Chico Hotel where he had a room, he saw Cleg Blangy's burro and Al Crulman's roan standing side by side in the town corral. The two mounts were as different in appear-

ance as their riders. In his room he sat down to stare out a window, eastward along the street and beyond toward the Border.

Somehow, in some mysterious way, contraband was being brought into the States and other patrolman had failed to solve the method or make an arrest. He had positive injunctions to ferret out the smugglers and bring them to justice. He had never failed before and wouldn't fail now. But what about Shiela?

"Listen, big boy," he told himself, "you've got to watch your step. You can't be falling in love with her; you got a job to do."

While he sat there, the light faded from the street and sounds of revelry began to float upward on the still, hot air. Chico was a typical town of the Border, with all the vice attendant upon the mingling of races. He should be thinking of this, of ways and means of investigation, but instead there floated before his eyes the vision of a whirling, prancing girl clad in not much more than an old mantilla, and doing the only thing of pleasure she knew.

"Lord!" he breathed. "What a picture! If any of the wolves here in Chica ever saw her like that—" His hands clenched tightly.

It was one of those moonlight nights when possible smugglers would think twice before chancing discovery. So Tom didn't plan to ride the line. His one thought in leaving the room was to get something to eat. Once in the street he saw that Al Crulman's place was even more populated than usual. The man certainly had a way of attracting customers from both sides of the line. His liquor was considered good and certainly his gambling room offered every known device of chance. Then, of course, the dance hall end was always popular, for he hired none but young girls, mostly Mexican and well known for their ardent companionship.

Tom glanced through a window as he headed toward a restaurant. His brief glimpse of the interior revealed Crulman leaning against the long bar and Cleg Blangy standing beside him. Blangy was weaving slightly and sighting through a glass of whisky. Apparently, he'd had more than enough, and Tom, thinking of Shiela, wondered what his temper might be under such conditions.

So he turned back and entered the door, stood just inside and looked about the place. A hundred pairs of eyes noticed his entrance and the murmur of voices ran lower. This was not unusual; many times Tom had sensed this sort of reception when entering a place along the Border. He was the law. He did not miss the flick of Crulman's hand or mistake the signal. From a crowd near the dance floor a lithe Mexican girl emerged and sauntered toward him.

"*Buenas nochas, senor.* You weesh for the dance, no?"

Tom glanced casually at the painted face before him, at the scant costume and cheap jewelry. He shook his head.

"Not dance weeth Carlota?" She feigned surprise. "I am the bes' one here, *mi linda.* Or perhaps you weesh for a drink?"

"Try your ankles," he suggested and pushed past her.

There was more than casual interest in Al Crulman's eyes as he watched the tall patrolman approach. Tom met the glance squarely for a time and then shifted to Cleg Blangy. "Had about enough, hasn't he?" He asked.

"Oh, Cleg's all right," returned the saloon keeper. "He don't slop over very often. This just happens to be a special occasion."

Cleg Blangy weaved toward them. "Special occasion," he echoed a bit thickly. "Mighty special occasion. First time in Chico. You just watch." He nodded his shaggy head in solemn anticipation. "Knock your eye right out, eh, Al?"

"A little surprise for the customers," admitted Crulman.

THE saloon was hot and filled with evil odors. Tom shrugged and retraced his steps to the door. At the present rate Cleg Blangy would be dead drunk within an hour and quite likely would remain in Chico to sleep it off. Perhaps it would be just as well to warn Shiela of the situation. Besides, it was a moonlight night and he wasn't at all adverse to seeing her again.

At the saloon door he looked back and saw there was a general movement toward the next room which was a combination gambling and dance hall. Whites and Mexicans alike were crowding into the place. Cleg Blangy, also was headed that way, walking along the bar with one hand gripping it to steady his wavering steps. Here was a chance to take charge of Shiela's uncle, lead him from the saloon and take him home. Tom hastened toward the bar, caught the old man's arm and began to urge him gently along.

"Better come on home, Cleg," he said. "Shiela is up there all alone."

"Shiela, home?" Cleg Blangy stared vacantly and then shook his head. "Wrong, ossifer; she ain't home. She's right here."

"What!"

In the room beyond a space had been cleared in the middle of the floor. Four Mexicans with guitars were seated at the edge of the cleared space. At a signal they began a slow tango.

Something inside Tom began to burn. He left Cleg Blangy and went into the next room to stand behind the crowd. Al Crulman was on the far side, his blue-black jowls shining in the yellow light as he smiled and waved toward a door which led to a rear hallway. Out of that door came a slight figure, timidly at first, then with more confidence. She was moving with the music even as she reached the dance floor.

It was Shiela, and she was clad as Tom had seen her in the clearing that noon. She clutched the old mantilla a bit tighter than then and she did not smile. Her round and firm white legs gleamed as the tempo increased. Smoothly she glided and dipped, and presently the pulsating rhythm made her forget the staring, lustful eyes of those who watched. Freely, she gave herself to the dance, abandoning her first efforts to keep the mantilla closely wrapped.

In those first moments Tom stood as though petrified; he couldn't believe it possible. She had acted scared when he had discovered her, but now —well, this was almost brazen. No, not that; it was the music and her utter joy in dancing. He looked at the ring of tense faces about the floor, read what was in their minds. Some of the dance hall girls were smiling with a fixed expression to hide their envy and hate. Al Crulman had pulled a cigar from his vest pocket and was rapidly chewing it to a pulp. This was his idea, Tom thought. He had gotten old Cleg drunk and forced Shiela into this exhibition.

Tom's wrath was not a sudden fiery thing; it built up within him like a blue flame. He had seen many uncouth, immoral things along the Border, but this topped them all. That girl out there was not the type who frequented dance halls.

The men immediately before him parted as he thrust himself forward. He stood with braced legs until Sheila finished the circle and drew near; then he reached out and caught her arm. She looked at him, but he could have sworn that it took seconds for her to throw off the spell of music and rhythm, and realize where she was. Then her eyes widened and fixed upon his stern face. "Tom?" she whispered.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded harshly. "Don't you know this is nothing but a hell-hole?"

"Aw, leave her be!" A man nearby growled. "What you buttin' in for?"

A Mexican, his blood seething and afire with what he had just seen, slid a knife from his sash. Tom caught the movement in the corner of his eye, whirled and kicked the man squarely in the mouth. Blood and teeth spilled to the floor.

Al Crulman came across the open space with long strides. "Look here, Garret, you've no right to do this. I'm complying with all your damned laws, and so long as I do you'll keep your place."

Tom gazed at the man and decided that all the words he could use to describe his feelings would be of no use. Al Crulman had no morals, no sense of decency; if a young girl served his purpose he wouldn't hesitate to use her. Therefore, anything Tom might say would have no effect. He merely tightened his grip on Shiela's arm and said, "Come."

"Damn you, Garret! I say let her alone. She's getting paid for this. She was willing to do it."

"You lie!" snapped Tom. "Paid for it, maybe, but you or that drunken uncle of hers talked or forced her into it. She's going home."

"Oh, no she ain't!" Crulman's anger was mounting swiftly. Garret was spoiling something he had planned for a long time. It might mean ultimate trouble with the law, but if he did nothing to protect what he considered his own right, he would lose face in the sight of steady customers, and so he did a foolish thing—reached under his coat.

Long experience had taught Tom Garret to strike first. He did that now, swiftly—like a bolt of lightning. His bunched fist came down in an overhand blow, raked Crulman's nose and landed on the blue-black chin. The saloon keeper's knees buckled and he sat down on the floor, weaved slightly and then folded over on his side.

Like a pack of wolves the circle of men began to close in. It was then that Tom whipped out his gun and waved it in a swift arc. "Back up!" he shouted. The weapon checked the advance; it cleared a way to the door. Tom went through it still holding Shiela by the arm. Her face was as white as the moonlight which splashed the dusty street outside.

Cleg Blangy sat on the floor with his back to the bar and head on breast. He was out cold, helpless. They passed him and went on to the outer door, conscious of the rising murmur of voices in the room they had left. There on the outside walk Tom paused and tried to wrap the mantilla more closely about her.

"My other dress is back there," she whispered.

"We'll leave it." He looked at the slivered board-walk and at her bare feet. Without another word he gathered her up in his arms and strode toward the town corral. She tucked her head against his breast and began to sob. The sound did something to Tom's throat and dimmed his anger. Suddenly, he was conscious of her weight, of the soft white body pressed against his own. "Shiela," he murmured huskily. "My little Shiela."

FIVE minutes later they were on his horse and moving into the gray desert. He still held her in his arms, closely, tightly, although she had stopped sobbing. The moon was spinning tiny beads of light in her hair which flowed down over his knees. They passed the entrance to the first arroyo—the second, and came to Tres Arroyo.

"Shiela, he made you do it, didn't he? Al Crulman or your uncle?"

"Crulman wanted to know if I would, Tom. He said it would be all right and that he'd pay me for it. Uncle Cleg said to go ahead."

"Crulman saw you dance before tonight," he declared. "That must have been him up on the rim of the arroyo.

He thought what a fine thing it would be for him if you'd come down to his den and do it there. There in that pack of wolves."

"It—it was wrong, Tom?"

"Wrong! My God, those are not human beings down there. They're vultures, greedy, gutty vultures. Why, Crulman's own dance girls wouldn't appear with nothing much more on than an old mantilla. You were just a tender morsel for that crowd, something Crulman was using to tease his customers. No telling what would have happened if you had gone on. Crulman himself might have had to fight for you."

"But I didn't know, Tom, didn't realize that—that—"

"Of course you didn't. But you do now."

"Yes, Tom. I was only doing it because I wanted the extra money for something."

He drew in a deep breath. "No money should ever buy a glimpse of your body, Shiela. That should belong to just one man." He waited but she said nothing. "You understand, don't you?"

"Yes," came the faint response. Then, "I'm glad you came for me, Tom." She peeked up at him, saw that the stern look had gone from his face. "And—and I'll never dance for anyone again but you."

His head went down quickly. "Then I can be that one man, Shiela?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Shiela—Shiela," and he buried his mouth against the curve of her neck.

CHAPTER III
Love in the Moonlight

THE moon was bright in Tres Arroyo that night, so silvery that the harsher aspects of the place took on a fine, disguising lace. And it was so silent, so utterly still. Tom's horse stood in the clearing with drooping head and slopped over on one hip. Tom sat on the top step of the porch, Shiela still in his arms. She rested against his breast, her own rising and falling in slow rhythm, for she was fast asleep, worn out by the night's emotions.

For two hours he sat thus, unwilling to move and break the spell. One smooth white knee gleamed there and once he bent to take the mantilla fringe in his teeth to pull it over as a covering. This movement roused her and she murmured sleepily.

"Time you were in bed, honey," he said, then stood up and passed through the cabin door.

The first room was of general use, and a pallet was spread in one corner. He went on through a door hung by strap hinges and came to a room at the back of the cabin. Here shafts of moonlight revealed a cot with coverings neatly folded. About the walls were small pictures evidently cut from some catalog; pictures of ladies in fine gowns; pictures of those lacy things which girls in better circumstances wore under the fine dresses; pictures of those things that Shiela had, without doubt, so earnestly longed for.

He stooped and gently laid her on the cot, releasing his hold gradually that he might not disturb her. But before he could move away, two white arms lifted and encircled his neck, drew him down.

"Tom?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Please don't leave me. I—I'm still afraid."

"I won't go, Shiela; I'll be right here." He took the arms from about his neck, kissed the small palms of her hands and then pressed them down on the cot.

He was a bit dizzy and his face was hot as he again sat down on the top step of the porch and rolled a soothing cigarette. Gone was the usually

(Continued on page 146)

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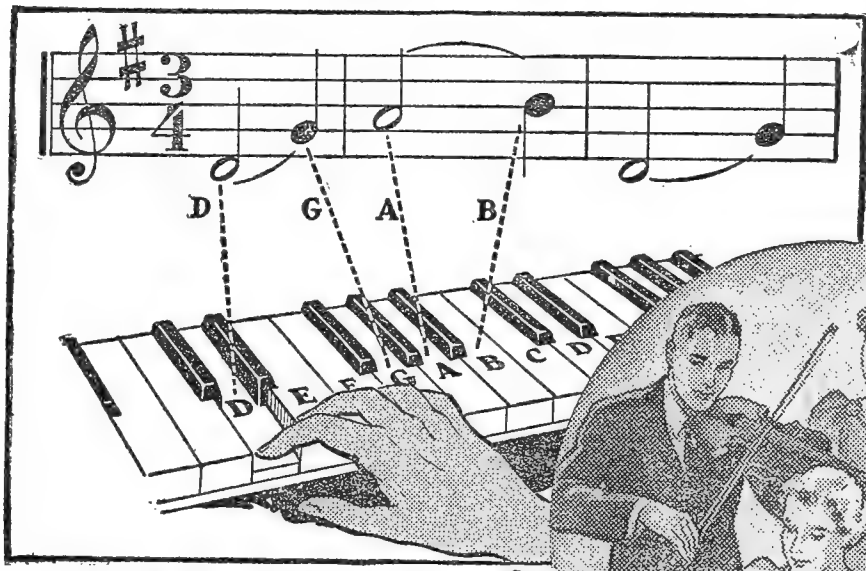

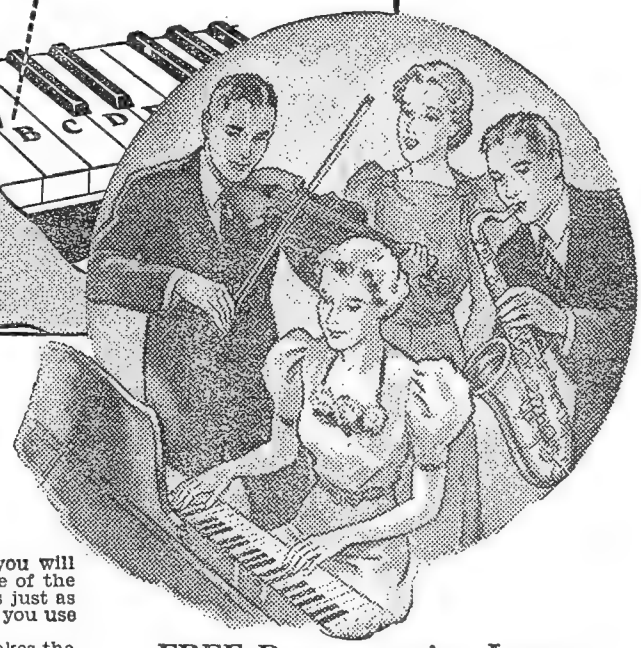

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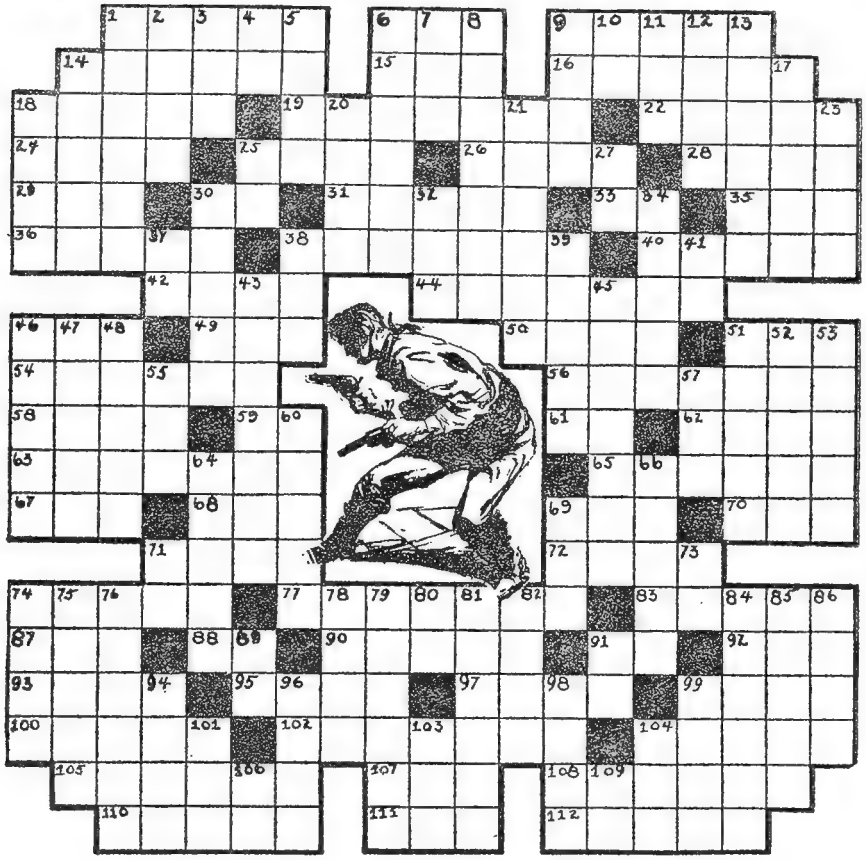

ACROSS

1. Helmsman
6. Not cooked
9. Track
14. Horsemen
15. Island: Fr.
16. Piece of harness
18. Established
19. Horse-food
22. Even
24. Small insects
25. Seed covering
26. Daybreak
27. A plain
28. Past
30. At
31. Allots
33. Mother: coll.
35. Even: poet.
36. Trades
38. Arid lands
40. Division of society
41. Lowest female voice
44. Free from germs
46. Unusual
49. Unit of work
50. Plundering foray
51. Cry: Fr.
54. Afternoon nap
56. Like an island
58. King who married Gudrun: Norse myth
59. Father: coll.
61. North-eastern state: abbr.
62. Woman's name
63. Rides fast
65. Ranch
67. Cloth measures: var.
68. Thing, in law
69. Sea eagle
70. Enemy
71. Female horse
72. Clip
74. Article of personal property
77. Seats for horseback riders
88. Stain
87. College yell
88. Printer's measure
90. Goblin
91. Dipthong
92. Be ill
93. Image
95. Lubricates
97. European wild cherry
99. Dressed pelts
100. Sink
102. Settlers
104. Passage
105. Pertaining to Etna
107. Age
108. Cowboys' best friends
110. Sows
111. Bar
112. Western plant

DOWN

1. Revolver
2. Roman March 15
3. Guided
4. Either
5. Former Russian ruler
6. Guns
7. Wings
8. One who welds
9. Melts
10. Egyptian sun god
11. Every
12. Short article
13. Quays
14. Pasture region
17. Recompose type
18. Bleats
20. Citrous fruit
21. Speedier
23. Narrow track
25. One
27. Western state: abbr.
30. Small island
32. Beverage
33. Sour substances
37. Note of the scale
38. Canine
39. Country at civil war
41. B.C.
43. One who ensnares animals
45. Cheap gambler
46. Oklahoma Indian
47. Musical stop
48. Valleys
51. High, steep face of rock
52. Wireless
53. Angry
55. Yellow ocher
57. Ultimo: abbr.
60. Beasts of burden
64. Make a speech
66. Combine
69. S-shaped worm
71. Myself
73. Geometrical function
74. Dry
75. Consecrate
76. Fires a gun
78. Capable
79. Basket carried by a horse
80. Dei gratia: abbr.
81. Myth
82. One who observes
84. Seasickness
85. Young women
86. If not
89. Negative
91. Upon
94. Not any
96. Taverns
98. Deadly pale
99. State treasury
101. Pastry dessert
103. Also
104. Portion of a curve
106. Public notice
109. Owe you

(ANSWER ON PAGE 145)

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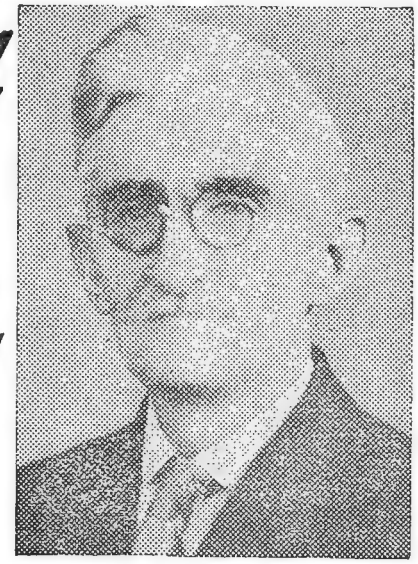

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DEAR PEN PALS:

I had almost forgotten about Valentine's Day being so close when some of you folks sent me such nice valentines to remind me. Not that I haven't any romance in my soul—I've plenty of that—but your letters have poured in so heavily and the days have rolled along so quickly that it seems like the day before yesterday I was making New Year's resolutions to write an open letter thanking all of you for all the nice letters, Christmas cards, etc., that you've sent me in the past months. Not only have I neglected you, but I've shamefully neglected "Pale Face", my sorrel horse, who must rely on the stable boy to bring him sugar every day. But, gosh, what's a gal to do when she just doesn't have enough time to do all the things she'd like to? But be sure to watch every issue for your name in the Roundup and—whoa! here's the mailman with another batch of letters. Maybe he's mistaken me for Cupid instead of just your ol' saddlepard.

JOAN REMINGTON

PERSISTENCE PAYS!

DEAR JOAN:

This is my second attempt to slip through the corral gates. Why don't you give a regular reader of WESTERN ROMANCES a chance to prove what a real pen pal he can be?

Letter writing is my hobby, although I go in for all sports, music, cycling, reading, camping—in fact everything active. After spending sixteen years of my life in one place, I have finally moved and as yet haven't made many new friends. I would like to hear from potential pen pals of either sex about my own age, which is nineteen.

Box 114 Sincerely yours,
Chrichton, Alabama JOHN HANCOCK

REDHEADED RANNY

DEAR FRIEND:

I am thirty-seven years old, weigh one hundred and seventy pounds, six feet two inches tall, auburn hair, and a kind disposition. I am a farmer by occupation but a laborer by force of circumstances.

I am very much interested in poultry and livestock raising and crops. I would like to hear from ranchers or ranchers' daughters and would like to write about ranch and farm life to them. My hobbies are hunting, fishing, trapping, and taking snapshots.

Here's hoping for a new lease on life!

R.F.D. No. 1, W.P.A. Camp Sincerely,
Vallonia, Indiana CECIL R. LAMB

QUALIFICATIONS GALORE!

DEAR JOAN:

I live in the Windy City and am very lonely as I have just come from Arizona, where I lived for the past twenty years.

I am twenty-four years old, six feet two, fair complexion with blond hair, and a medical student in Chicago. As for activities, I am quite athletically inclined, having been a seven letter man in college as well as a life guard for five years and a minor league baseball player for two years.

My hobby is horses. I have done rodeo riding, but no bronc busting; however, I ride every day as I brought my horse up here.

I would like to hear from girls over eighteen and divorcees. Snaps are promised to the first five who write.

4170 Drexel Blvd. Sincerely,
Chicago, Ill. TED N. HOFFMAN

FROM ACROSS THE BIG POND

DEAR JOAN:

May I join your Roundup, please? Here are my qualifications: brown wavy hair, blue eyes, and eighteen years of age. My hobbies include stamp and snap collecting, the films, and letter writing.

Durham City, my home, boasts an ancient cathedral and a castle. Just write to me if you would like to hear about them, or would like to receive photos. Letters from any part of the world would be welcome.

3 The Terrace In eager anticipation,
Meadowfield DORIS DUXFIELD
Co. Durham, England

We Have So Many Letters Coming In Asking For Pen Pals That We'll Have To Shorten Some. We Want All Our Roundup Members To Have The Advantage Of This Department.

DAVID BROWN is a philatelist and wants to exchange stamps with anyone in Newfoundland or the United States. He is thirty-seven and some time ago lost one of his legs. All letters will be welcome, just address them to Lashburn, Sask., Canada.

EVELYN ROBY is a none-too-busy stenog who wants to hear from folks interested in short story writing, poetry, hiking, and writing long letters. She would like to exchange postal views, and she has some of Pikes Peak, Will Rogers Memorial Shrine, Garden of the Gods, and the Cheyenne Mountain Lodge. Evelyn's mailbox number is 5, West End Station, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

MARJORIE ROBAR wants to hear from cowpokes. She's sixteen, slim, auburn haired, and likes cowboy songs and guitar music. Her address is Meiseners, Lunenburg Co., Nova Scotia.

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30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
6.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
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MISS E. BROWN writes from Bonnie Scotland to tell us how much she enjoys WESTERN ROMANCES and to put in her plea for some American pen friends, particularly some of our sailors. She's eighteen years old; claims she's plump, and her hair is a cross between a redhead and a blonde. Dancing, sports, and writing are the things she likes best in life.—Police Station, East Wemyss, Fife, Scotland.

HARRY BARKER writes scripts for broadcasts, and is also an expert character reader and handwriting expert. He's twenty-three and would like to hear from pen pals from anywhere. He'll be glad to tell you all about his profession, just write to P. O. Box 186, Denver, Colorado.

ETHEL MIDGLEY writes from England for pen friends far and near. She is interested in stamp collecting, autographs, and likes the cinema. Her age is thirty; she's tall and a slim brownette. Ethel sounds like a darn good correspondent and we're sure you won't be disappointed in her letters.—9 Westgate Hill, Tong, Bradford, Yorkshire, England.

JACK DU PHELPS is recuperating from a fractured skull and spends many a lonesome hour reading WESTERN ROMANCES. Jack was born and raised on a large spread in Montana, and he can rope, ride, shoot, and swear with the best of cowhands. He's traveled over Borneo, China, Alaska, and has trapped and hunted nearly every wild animal in America. His age is twenty-nine; his weight one sixty-five; he's tall, and as Irish as Patty's Pet Pig. He's a connoisseur of ranch life and guns, so if there's any information you want, write to 709 E. Pike St., Seattle, Wash.

FREEDA MAKUS borrows WESTERN ROMANCES from all her friends. She's fifteen, a light brunette with blue eyes, and five feet two inches tall. Folks say she's mighty purty, and she wants to hear from handsome six-foot lads around her age. Her address is Route One, Chewelak, Wisconsin.

AL MILASH is a dreamer, according to his friends. But he's plenty shy when it comes to dating girls. Seems as how he just can't get acquainted with the fairer sex and hopes he'll make some friends through this medium. Al must spend lots of time in the movies, he sees about three hundred of them a year. He can probably name every movie star in Hollywood. Incidentally, his age is just twenty and his address is 2535 W. 45th St., Chicago, Ill.

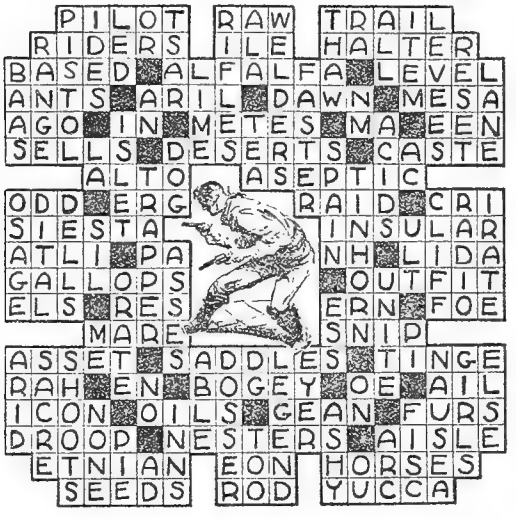
WESLEY VAN DE VERE is particularly fond of the name Joan, and wants to hear from all the Joans between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five. His ancestors were French and Wes has a passion for all French things including French girls and French fried potatoes. He claims that his worst hobby is fiction writing and wants all amateur writers, both prose and poetry, to write to him at Canaan, Indiana.

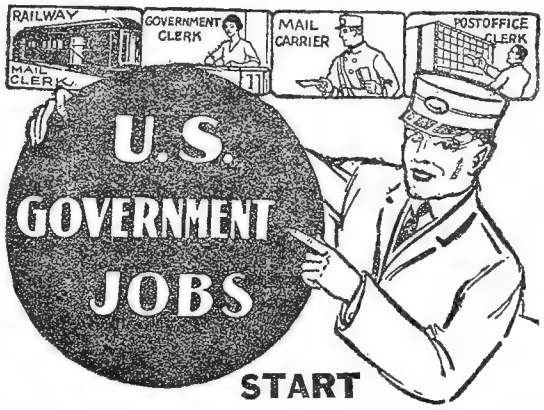
RAY STONE, a real Texas cowpoke, claims he's a lonesome hombre who likes all sports. He's thirty, wants to corral a few pards, and promises lots of cow-country information. Write to him at La Marque, Texas.

LYDIA BRINLEE is a true Western girl, born and raised in Colorado and now working on a suburban ranch caring for goats. She claims they're swell, dependable pals. Lydia is sixteen, little but mighty, and is interested in anything you are.—c/o Grace Alexander, Route One, Florence, Colorado.

PAUL MICHAEL is a drugstore cowboy from the coal region of Pennsylvania. His hobbies are billiards, stamp collecting, swimming, and writing. As for looks, he's tall, dark, and promises a picture to prove that he's handsome. Address your letters to 142 Park St., Nanticoke, Pa.

SYLVIA ANDERSON, a New Zealand lassie of seventeen, likes our magazine better than any she has ever read. She wants to hear from anyone interested in art, swimming, yachting, and books. "Syl" will be glad to exchange snaps of her country and promises to answer all letters. Her address is 10 Le Weka St., Timain, South Canterbury, South Island, New Zealand.





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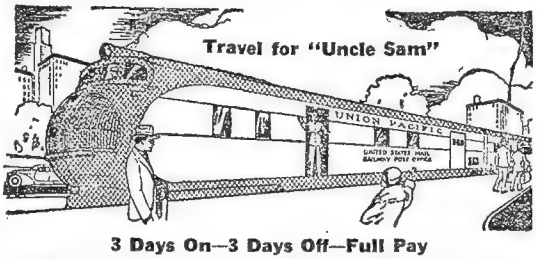

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(Continued from page 138)

ever-present thought that he was a Border Patrolman with a job to do. Tonight he was Tom Garret, a man in love with the sweetest, most unsophisticated child in the world. He could think of nothing else as he sat there watching the round moon wheel slowly across the sky. That open patch before him, that clearing, why, only today he had seen her for the first time, dancing there like some nymph. And now—now she belonged to him.

HE was still there when dawn dimmed the slanting light of the moon, resting with his back against a bole, eyes closed and dreaming. But he was not asleep; he heard the sound down on the trail and was erect when Cleg Blangy appeared, riding the shaggy burro. Shiela's uncle drew up before the porch and slid to the ground. His bearded face was bloated and his eyes were bleary, but he could walk straight. He came to the porch and sat down.

"So you call yourself an uncle," said Tom.

Cleg Blangy waved a hand. "Go ahead, Garret. I got it comin' I s'pose."

"Why did you let her do it?"

"I was drunk. Crulman got me that way."

"Rats! The thing was arranged before you went to Chico. I think Crulman watched Shiela dancing this afternoon. You both let on like he was up here to look at your sheep. Hell! What would Crulman want with your woolies! That was just a blind. You'd spilled it that Shiela could dance and he came up to see about it."

"Crulman is a hard man to deny somethin' to," muttered Cleg.

"Maybe he's got something on you."

"Somethin' on me?" blustered Blangy. "Nothin' at all. He just said it was a shame that Shiela should have to wash for a little money when he'd pay her—"

"Let it go," Tom interrupted. "You know as well as I do what Al Crulman had in the back of his head. But let me tell you something, Cleg Blangy. There'll be no more attempts such as was made last night. Shiela will dance no more."

"Seems to me you're gettin' mighty high-handed, fella. You're just a stranger, a new patrolman here, an'—"

Tom stood up, reached down and grasped the old man by the shoulders, lifting him quickly and easily, all with the same continuous movement. "Listen to me," he said sternly. "What I say goes so far as Shiela is concerned. I brought her home last night, and right here on these steps something occurred that makes her mine."

"Dam' you!" choked Cleg Blangy. "If you touched—if you—"

Tom shook the man until the bleary eyes bulged. "You foul brained buzzard," he growled. "If you ever hint at such a thing again I'll wring your scrawny neck! Shiela said she'd marry me. Can you understand that? Marry me! And if you let Al Crulman or any of those other wolves come near her I'll kill the lot of you."

Released, Cleg Blangy sank back and wiped dry lips. "I didn't savvy, Garret, honest I didn't. It's all right if Shiela says so."

"Then keep that in mind. Now, you'd better soak your head in that kettle yonder and go to bed."

HE didn't wait for the man to follow his suggestion but mounted and rode up the arroyo. It was not his intention to let the cabin out of his sight for a while yet, but he wanted it to appear that he had left. Near the arroyo top he came to a small level plot where a little grass grew. The ground was damp which indicated that a spring flowed beneath or issued from some nearby ledge. Blangy's sheep were there, some thirty or forty head.

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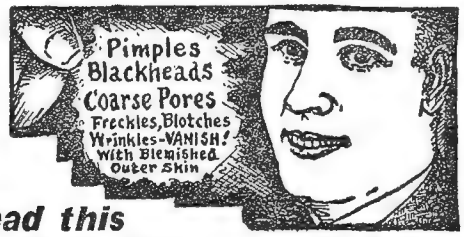

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"Haven't been sheared in the Lord knows when," he muttered. "I suppose that old fool is too lazy to do the job. He'll have to get them to water soon too."

At the head of the arroyo he swung west to that rim and followed a small trail leading southward. In time he would come to the spot above the cabin where he had seen the movement the day before. When he did arrive there he saw where a horse had stood, and the prints of a man who had not worn high heeled boots. Also there was the stub of a cigar which had been thoroughly chewed. Al Crulman, of course.

Tom sat down upon the low side of a boulder and looked over the surrounding country. Below him, to his left, was Tres Arroyo, with the little cabin and the empty yard. He looked to the south, across those miles of desert which spread on into Mexico. Wave on wave of heat, and the sun scarcely up. It was an empty scene, and to one not familiar with the Border, hardly something to worry about so far as smuggling was concerned. But Tom knew that men crossed that vast emptiness laden with contraband. You might not see them but they were there.

And now the thought of his job came back to him stronger than ever. The sooner he found the leak here the sooner he would be able to depart with Shiela.

IT was an hour later that Shiela came out of the cabin and began building a fire under the large kettle; she was preparing to do his washing. When the fire was going she returned to the steps and sat down, becoming intent on something she held in her lap. Tom remounted and sent his horse down the steep side of the arroyo. Deep compassion stirred him when he saw that the book on her lap was a mail order catalog. She flushed and placed it behind her on the porch.

"I thought you had gone back to Chico," she said.

"I've been up yonder, watching." He sat down beside her and took the hand nearest him. Shiela averted her eyes, seemed concerned with the fire under the kettle. "Look here," he said. "You haven't changed your mind."

"Oh, no, Tom. It's just that I'm—I'm so ashamed."

"Then you do love me, really?"

Now she turned to face him. "So much, Tom. But it makes me afraid." She wiggled a bare toe. "You see, since I haven't been out of this country, I'm afraid I won't know how to act, and I don't want you to be ashamed of me."

"Ashamed of you! Shiela, I'll be proud."

"But I haven't any nice clothes, Tom."

"We'll fix that."

Her lips trembled slightly. "It just seems too beautiful to be true, to get away from this place and be with you, always."

"It'll come true, and soon. I've got to find who it is that's smuggling dope across the line in this section. We'll leave when the job is done."

"Oh, I wish I could help you," she said fervently.

"It'll help me a lot just to know that you're up here in the arroyo, safe and waiting. And now I must go back to Chico, get on the job." He lifted her, placed his arms about her. "You've a kiss for me before I go?"

Passionately she threw her arms about his neck, clung to him. As they stood thus, Cleg Blangy came out of the cabin door, uttered an unintelligible grunt and passed on to the yard. He found his burro and rode up the arroyo.

A little later Shiela stood beside Tom as he sat his horse. "The washing," she said a little anxiously. "Shall I bring it down to you?"

"You stay here," he advised. "I'll come back tonight."

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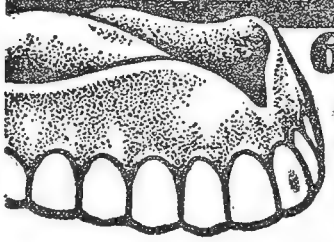

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Her smile was wistful. "It will be a long day," she said.

"A long day," he agreed. "But tonight the moon shines again."

TOM rode down the arroyo trail, reluctantly forcing his mind from pleasant thoughts to the task ahead. He must find a beginning, a clue of some sort, and hoped that his usual good luck would not desert him.

When he came to Chico he found that heat and the usual doldrums following a wild night gripped the place. The dusty street was deserted; there were but few persons lined up at the bar in Al Crulman's saloon. It was the wrong time of day for him to expect any repercussions, any show of hostility, but he kept his eyes open just the same. Reaching his room he set about shaving, and found a note pinned to the sheet of his bed. It read: "Senor Garret. See me at once. Carlota."

"Carlota," he mused. "Who—oh, the Mexican girl that came up to me last night. Wonder what she's got on her mind! Some half-baked notion, very likely. Maybe means to warn me about Crulman."

He dismissed the note with a shrug, shaved and returned to his horse. Again he passed up the street and eastward along the line. One never knew when a crossing would be attempted, and if it were reported that he was still in Tres Arroyo they might be at it now.

He had covered barely half a mile when he saw movement in the heat waves ahead. Spurring on he soon learned what it was. Cleg Blangy was moving his thirsty band of sheep southward. The sheep were going slowly, heads thrust forward, mouths open.

"Where's the water, Cleg?" asked Tom as he drew near.

"Yonder a mile or so. Sort of a sump what don't seem to dry up. Danged nuisance to have to make this

drive, but the spring in the arroyo has petered out. I let 'em soak for a few hours before makin' the drive back."

Tom nodded thoughtfully and rode on.

CHAPTER IV
Jealousy's Reward

IT came to him during that long, hot afternoon that he was up against a tough proposition. There were miles of desert on this section of the line, and one man could not hope to cover it adequately. However, he had never asked for help and he wouldn't ask for it now. He must, by some means, acquire accurate information and go by that. But who, in this land apparently hostile to the patrol, would furnish that information?

He found the answer to this when he returned to Chico at dusk. As he entered his room in the hotel a shadow moved in one corner; someone spoke his name. "Well?" he said crisply.

"It is I, Carlota. You did not come to see me."

"No," he said.

"But I have sometheeng to tell you, *amigo*."

"Crulman? He's aiming for me?"

"Bah! Crulman is scare of you. You have smash hees jaw. No, this is about smuggling."

"Ah! What about it?"

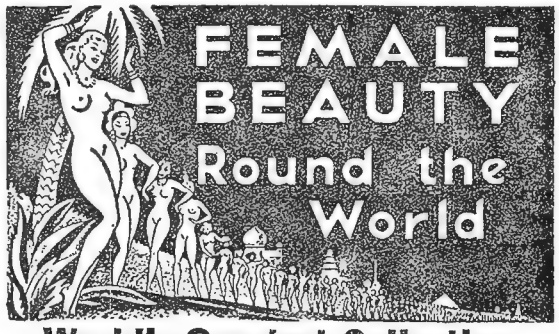
The Mexican girl drew nearer, leaned against him and stood on tiptoe to whisper in his ear. "Juan Sebastian ees the one."

"Don't know him."

"You know no one here, Senor Garret. Juan, he bring those white powder across the Border himself. Far up the line to the east. He never ride; always walk so that he can hide queeckly when patrolman come along."

"Why do you tell me this, Carlota?"

The girl drew in a hissing breath.



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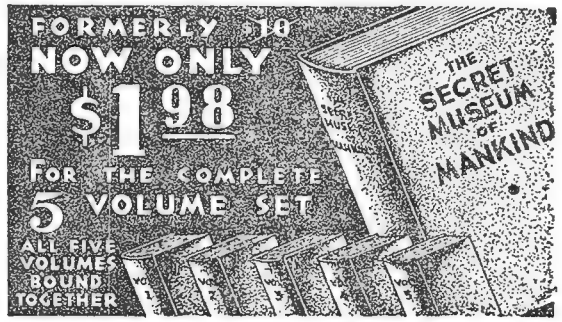

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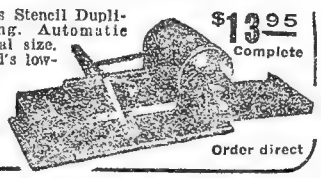

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"One time Juan is my lover, *seguro.* But now he is reech from smuggling an' like some other girl. I feex him!"

"Oh, sure," said Tom. This was not the first time he had turned jealousy to his own use along the Border. "Where does Juan usually cross the line?"

"To the east, *amigo;* there where the hills are many so that he may hide. He does it mostly at night."

"Well, thanks a lot. Maybe I can do something for you sometime."

She pressed his hand. "Catch Juan, that's all I ask. An' now I mus' go back to Crulman's. If he miss me an' look for me it will be bad."

"Down the back stairs," Tom suggested and led the way.

There in the shadows they parted, Carlota to slip along at the rear of the buildings, Tom to turn toward the street. But before he had taken ten steps another figure moved there in the dusk. Swiftly he whirled, gun ready, but saw near him a face that showed white in the dying light. It was Shiela.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he asked in surprise.

"What was she—that Mexican woman—doing with you?" she panted.

"Don't get the wrong idea, Shiela," he said.

"I want to know!" she cried. "She came out of the hotel with you."

"That's right. She was in my room."

"Oh—no!"

"Listen!" he said fiercely and caught her arm. "She came to give me a tip about the smuggling. The man I'm looking for used to be her lover, Juan Sebastian, by name. He turned her down, so she's turning him in to me. You've got to believe that, Shiela, for it's the truth." He waited briefly. "You do, don't you?"

"Yes," she whispered.

He gathered her in. "Don't ever think anything else, sweetheart. I don't love anybody but you and never will. You must understand that."

"I do, Tom. It was just that—well, it did something to me to see her there with you." She hid her face against his breast.

"And now that's settled," he said, "tell me what you're doing in Chico. Don't you know it's dangerous for you to come here?"

"Nobody saw me," she assured him. "I was slipping through this way to go back home."

"But why are you here?"

"I had to come—to mail a letter."

"Oh." Tom considered the explanation. Who in the world would she be writing to! But he didn't ask the question; she had accepted his explanation and he must accept hers. "You wait right here 'till I bring up my horse. I'll take you home."

She nodded assent.

THEY rode into the gloom of the desert, swinging slowly toward the entrance of Tres Arroyo. Shiela sat before him in the saddle, her back to his breast and her head resting against his shoulder. The night breeze wafted fine strands of her hair across his face, a touch as gentle as she was herself. In the east was the first pale streak of the rising moon.

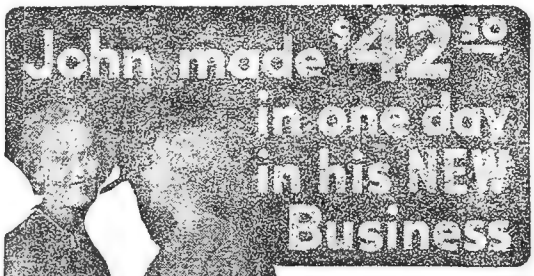
"I wish we could just ride on and on," she said at length.

"It shouldn't be long now, Shiela, before I can take you away. Just as soon as I land that Juan Sebastian my job will be done. Did you ever hear of the fellow?"

"I'm not sure; there are so many Mexicans in this country."

Tres Arroyo was gloomy when they entered it, but by the time they reached the cabin the moon was shining over the east rim. They stood there at the steps watching those magic shafts of light transform the ugly place. Somewhere below them sounded the faint tinkle of a bell.

"That's Uncle Cleg bringing the sheep home," she said. "He's been to the sump below the Border."



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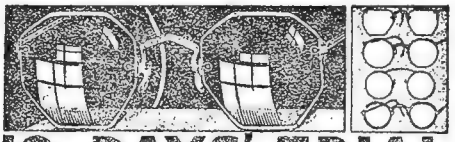

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"I know; I saw him going over. Has he said anything about last night?"

"Nothing, Tom. He hasn't spoken to me at all. He's that way after he's been drunk. I'll—I'll be glad to get away from here."

"Cleg hadn't better let Crulman talk him into any more stunts like last night. Your uncle is old, but that won't stop me from handling him rough. . . . But I've got to go, now. Perhaps I can catch Sebastian tonight."

TOM rode up the arroyo again, this time to the top where he turned eastward across the hills. At about the approximate place where he judged Juan Sebastian might make a crossing, he halted and hid in a shallow arroyo partially filled with brush. He remained there two hours and then shifted to higher ground where he would be able to see all of the country below. It was one vast silver sheen, empty of all movement.

"This ain't the night," he muttered at last. "Maybe Sebastian is laying low for a spell." He became conscious of a great weariness and realized that he had not slept in many hours. So he guided his horse to the country below, came to the line and followed it westward toward Chico, entering the town just before dawn and going directly to his room.

For the next seven nights he followed the same patrol, riding up to Tres Arroyo to see Shiela and then passing on to the east. Cleg Blangy was taking his sheep across the Border every other day now, and grumbling because the sump threatened to go dry on him.

"Somebody's either warned that Mex or he's changed his place of crossing," Tom said to Shiela that seventh night. "I'm going to give that east country one more whirl and then change tactics."

"Maybe," said Shiela, and hesitated,

"you should see Carlota again. Sebastian might have changed and she's heard about it."

"Oh, she'll hunt me up soon enough if she learns of that."

He didn't remain in the suspected country very long that night, heading back along the line after a brief time of waiting. As he rode into Chico he saw Al Crulman standing before the main door of his establishment, the first time he had laid eyes on the man since that first night. Crulman was chewing on a cigar but removed it to smirk at the patrolman as he passed by.

Tom met up with another surprise in his room. A man lay stretched on the bed, a man who eased up as the door opened and spoke Tom's name. Tom froze in his tracks, felt a flood of warm blood in his face. He swallowed stiffly and said, "Hello, Captain Cord. What brings you here?"

CHAPTER V
Love's Sacrifice

CAPTAIN CORD of the Border Patrol sat on the edge of the bed and eyed his subordinate. "You haven't been doing so well on this case, Tom."

"Kind of a tough one to crack, captain." Tom sat down on a chair and rolled a cigarette. "I haven't had much to go on except the word of a Mex girl in Crulman's place."

"You haven't, by any chance, been spending too much time up in a certain arroyo?"

Tom's color deepened. "I haven't spent much time there," he said stiffly.

"Humph! That don't agree with what I've heard." Cord bent forward and stared at Tom. "I thought you were smarter than that, son. You've had a fine record up to now, with no women mix-ups."

"This ain't a mix-up, Captain Cord. Shiela is the sweetest girl you—"

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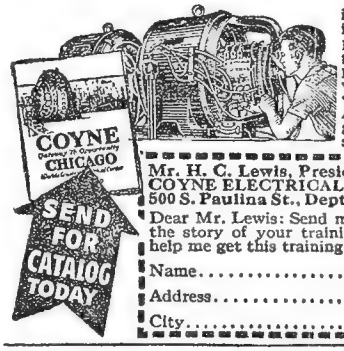

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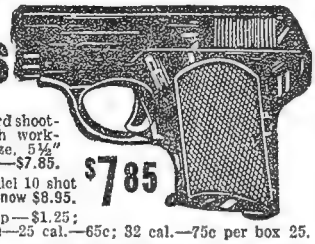

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"Yeah; I know. That's the way it hits a young buck like you. But I'm sort of disappointed."

Tom stood up. "I'll resign to you right now!" he snapped.

"Oh, shut up. Set down! You must be in love to go off half-cocked this way. Now, let's look sanely at this thing. A Mex girl comes to you and spills some information. You follow it but don't find anything. Has it occurred to you that the same Mex girl might have given you a bum steer, kept you busy in the wrong section of the country while her man came through here?"

"I was beginning to wonder about that," said Tom.

"And this other girl, this Shiela, as you call her; could she be a decoy also?"

"We'll leave Shiela out of it!" said Tom hotly. "She's not that kind."

"Umph! 'Course not. None of 'em are ever that kind. But they can fool a man just the same." Captain Cord was silent for a moment; then, "It's seldom I butt in on a man's district, especially a man on special assignment. I wouldn't have come here this time if something hadn't broke for us. We caught a fella up near Tombstone who was loaded down with dope. We put the screws on him and finally got some names that might interest you. One is Al Crulman, who, I think, is at the bottom of the job. Another name was Blangy—Cleg Blangy."

"Judas jumpin' priest!"

"That hit pretty close to home, Tom?"

"Cleg's her uncle," said Tom in a low voice.

"Yeah. Well, we did mighty well with that fella we caught, but we couldn't get out of him how the stuff was brought across the line. That was something he'd rather die than tell, so it must be a mighty slick pass." Captain Cord reached into a pocket, lifted something out and handed it

over. "Guess what that is, Tom?"

Tom turned it over in his fingers. He was holding a small bag of thin, white rubber, something not unlike the toy balloons sold at carnivals and circuses. It was smooth and soft in his fingers.

"So that's it, eh?"

"That's it, Tom. The man we caught had twenty of those rubber balloons on him, and every one full of dope. He certainly bulged in places."

"But a man couldn't walk across the line bulging like that without attracting attention, Cap."

"I agree with you there. So how did they come across?"

Tom thoughtfully ran his fingers across the thin, white rubber. Al Crulman and Cleg Blangy, eh? He was surprised and yet not surprised. After all, Crulman had come to the arroyo to see Cleg, and it certainly could not have been concerning the sheep.

"Sheep!" The thing hit him like a mallet. There was the answer.

"What about sheep?" asked Cord.

"Oh, Lord, right under my nose all the time. Look here, Cap. Cleg Blangy has been taking his band of sheep across the line every day or so, taking them to a sump of water down there. The next day he'd drive 'em back again."

"All right; so what?"

"I see it now. He took those sheep down there to fetch back the dope. These white rubber balloons were tied under the wool somehow. They'd never show there and I wouldn't examine the sheep anyhow. Crulman would meet Cleg up in the arroyo and they'd take off the stuff and pass it to some other gent to carry on. Hell, that Mex girl was sent to me just to put me off the track, send me over east so I wouldn't butt in on the game."

"Now you're getting somewhere, Tom! Ordinarily you would have been suspicious right from the start—the sheep passing back and forth

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across the line; the wild goose chase over east night after night. But you were too interested in this Shiela girl."

"As I said before, we'll leave her out of it," said Tom.

"But how can we? Cleg Blangy is her uncle. Don't ever think for a moment that she don't know all about this smuggling scheme."

"I'd bet my life she doesn't know anything about it."

"Rats! She's played you for a sucker right along."

Tom shook his head. "I'll never believe that!" Nevertheless he was considerably shaken by it all. He stood up. "Let's gather Crulman in right now."

"Easy, Tom. We got to catch them with the goods—red-handed. We'll wait a little while and then take a *pasear* up around this Tres Arroyo of yours; got to give those two a chance to get together. Did Blangy bring his sheep back north today?"

"Yes, he did."

"Good! In a little while we'll go up there and see what kind of freight was tucked under the wool."

FOR an hour they sat in the room, silent, contemplating the very smooth scheme that had fooled them. Tom still fingered the bit of rubber. Why, one of the things filled only to the size of a walnut was worth its weight in gold. And how easily it could be buried from sight in the thick wool of the sheep. That's why Cleg hadn't sheared his sheep!

It was close to midnight when the two officers rode out of town the wrong way, circled and came to Tres Arroyo. Tom led the way up the trail and as they neared the cabin he halted. "Cap," he said, "I've something I want to ask you."

"Go ahead, Tom."

"I want to speak to Shiela. If she says she's not mixed up in this I'm going to believe her."

Captain Cord grunted. "Ain't love grand? All right, son, but you'll find I'm right. Just so she don't warn the other two."

They went on, reached the clearing before the cabin and Tom dismounted. His heart was thumping as he made his way softly up the steps and peered inside. The pallet in the corner of the first room was empty, which meant that Cleg was up the arroyo. Tom went on, looked through the next door. Shiela was asleep on her couch, fully dressed and with the mail order catalog lying beside her. The moon, through a window at the rear, shown upon her face which was so peaceful, so innocent that Tom's heart ached when he thought of what he had to do.

"She don't know, she don't know," he insisted. "She wouldn't fool me that way." He bent over her, watched the slow rise and fall of her breast. More than anything else in the world he wanted to bend down and press his lips to the white forehead. "I know Cap Cord is wrong," he told himself. "I won't disturb her. Probably she waited up thinking I would come back this way."

As she was lying across the couch covers he did not try to pull them over her. Instead he looked about for some other sort of covering. At the foot of the couch was a cupboard made from packing cases. He went to it, pushed aside the burlap curtain and began feeling around. On a shelf his fingers touched the old mantilla. As he started to lift the shawl his fingers brushed something else.

It was smooth rubber. Something like an icy stream of water ran down his spine, chilled him to the bone; his mouth went dry and his throat tight. So Cord was right after all! Slowly he backed away, turned so that he would not be forced to look at the sleeping girl, and walked from the room. Outside he mounted and said, "Come!" in a harsh voice.

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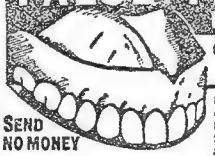

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Captain Cord was a shrewd man; he saw by Tom's face that the young patrolman had received a distinct shock. So he said nothing until they had gone a distance of two hundred yards from the cabin. "How much further?" he asked then.

"Not far. We'd better dismount and finish up on foot—carefully."

Quietly the two officers advanced, slipping cautiously through the brush so that no sound carried up the arroyo. Usually Tom took keen delight in such maneuvers, enjoying the capture of men; but tonight his heart was like lead. They came at last to where the ground was moist and slowed the pace still more. At the last bit of brush to offer shelter they halted. Beyond was the small band of sheep. Two men worked over them, one holding an anmal while the other explored the wool and removed small articles.

"That's the last, eh, Cleg?"

"Last one, Al. That makes sixty bundles in all."

"Nice pack. We'll hide the stuff in the usual place and I'll tell one of the boys to pick it up later."

"We'll pick it up now," said Captain Cord, stepping into the clear with gun leveled. Tom followed him.

"Oh, Gawd!" gulped Cleg Blangy. "We're ketched!"

"Reach for the moonbeams, men!" said Cord sternly. "Don't try anything." Then to Tom, "Get the guns if any, then gather up those rubber bindles."

"Dam' you, Garret!" Al Crulman, whose face had gone oddly gray, gritted.

"Shut up!" Tom snapped. "I'd enjoy cracking you another jolt on the jaw." He took the man's gun and shoved it under his own belt. Cord tossed forward the handcuffs and he snapped them about their wrists. Next he picked up the bit of sacking upon which had been piled the rubber bindles of dope.

"Tom," said Cleg Blangy, his voice cracking slightly. "This will hurt Shiela a heap. She loves you, Tom."

"Oh, yeah? Shove off you two. March!"

"I was just tryin' to fix it so's she could get out of this place. I've knowed all the time it wasn't no fit place for a gal like her, an'—"

"Quit whining. I'm sick of the lot of you."

"Then what's to become of Shiela? I can't leave her here alone."

"You won't; I'll see to that."

Crulman said, "I've had a dozen chances to kill you, Garret, and now I wish I had."

"You haven't the guts to kill a spider," Tom snorted. "You hire Mex gals to do your dirty work."

THEY returned down the trail, picked up the two horses and went on to the clearing. There Captain Cord hesitated and looked at Tom. Tom set his jaw and dismounted. "I'll call her," he said grimly.

For a matter of minutes he got no response; then Shiela, rubbing her eyes, appeared at the cabin door. "Oh, it's you, Tom! But—but—what—"

"Get what you need and come along," he told her.

Shiela stood there staring at the handcuffed men. "What has Uncle Cleg done?" She managed at length. Her eyes were now wide and questioning.

Tom spoke slowly, carefully, as though in respect for what had been between them in the past. "We've caught Cleg red-handed. He's been smuggling, bringing it in on the sheep. Crulman was with him."

"Uncle Cleg! And you told me that it was dangerous business. Oh, why did you do it?"

"Please, Shiela, it's gone far enough. I know about you now."

"You know—? But I don't understand, Tom."

"You're making it awful tough, girl. Get what clothes you'll need to

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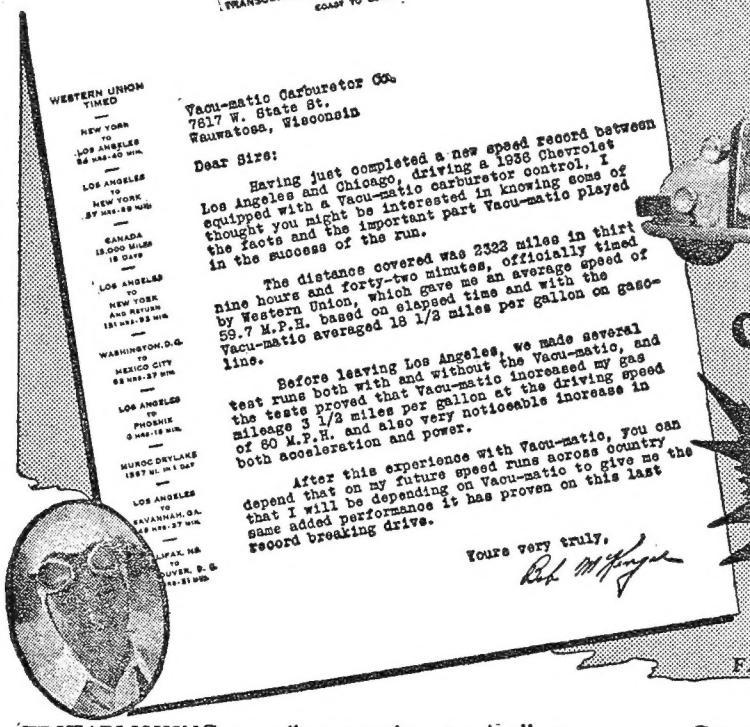

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take with you, please. And bring those rubber bindles that are on your closet shelf."

"Bindles?" She shook her head and stared at him. His tone of voice had cut her several times; she had never heard him speak that way before. "Won't you tell me—?" She began.

"Never mind. Just wait here." He pushed past her into the cabin, went to the closet and reached to the shelf. Gathering all of the rubber that he could feel he returned outside. His heart was in his throat as he joined her on the steps. "These," he cried, "these are what I mean, and you knew all the time what I meant. Shiela, how could you do it to me?"

Again she shook her head and tears trembled on her lashes. "I did it all for you," she choked. "You said that first day that it would ruin my hands, so—so—"

Tom slowly relaxed his clenched hand, stared at what lay on the broad palm. It was a pair of thin rubber gloves.

"Oh, Lord," he said huskily. "Lord, what have I done? Shiela, look at me." She had dropped her face into her hands and her shoulders shook. "Shiela! Believe me, I thought that these were bundles like those on the ground—bundles of dope." She did not lift her head and Tom stared past her to Captain Cord who sat his horse and slowly massaged his grizzled jaw.

"Stay with her, Tom," he said at last. "I'll take these men in. You stay here and fix it up; see if you can't get her to forgive me as well as yourself. Halifax, I'll never try to warp a man's judgment again." He lifted rein, spoke to the prisoners and started down the arroyo.

TOM went to her, placed his arms about the bent shoulders and drew her close. "You've got to forgive me, Shiela," he said desperately. "I didn't want to believe it. If you'd only told me about the rubber gloves . . ."

"I wanted to surprise you," she whispered. "I wanted you to see that my hands weren't so rough as before. That's why I went to town that night —to send a letter to the mail order house for the gloves. It took all the money I had to get them. I kept them in the closet for I didn't want Uncle Cleg to know about it. He would have said it was foolishness."

He bent his lips to her ear. "I don't know what to say, honey. I came here tonight and found you asleep. I reached in the closet for something to spread over you and touched—touched the gloves. Captain Cord had just showed me the rubber pouches that were used to bring the stuff across the line. What could I think?"

"You should have made sure, then, just what the rubber was."

"I know that now. So all I can do is ask you to forgive me. Will you, honey?"

"Of course, Tom. But—but you won't want to marry me now that Uncle Cleg is a criminal."

"Want to marry you! You just wait. We're going to Chico right now and have the job done immediately." He stuffed the rubber gloves in his pocket, stooped over and picked her up. "We're bothering about nothing up here." Holding her closely to him he went across the clearing and stepped into the saddle. "Take a good look around, Shiela, for this is the last time you'll see Tres Arroyo."

She peered backward over a shoulder. He felt her lips trembling against his cheek. "It —it isn't so bad, Tom. After all, this was where I first saw you."

He moved her head about so that the moon shone into her eyes. The love there, and utter trust, thickened his throat so that he could not speak. So he did what expressed his feelings more perfectly. He bent to touch his lips to hers.

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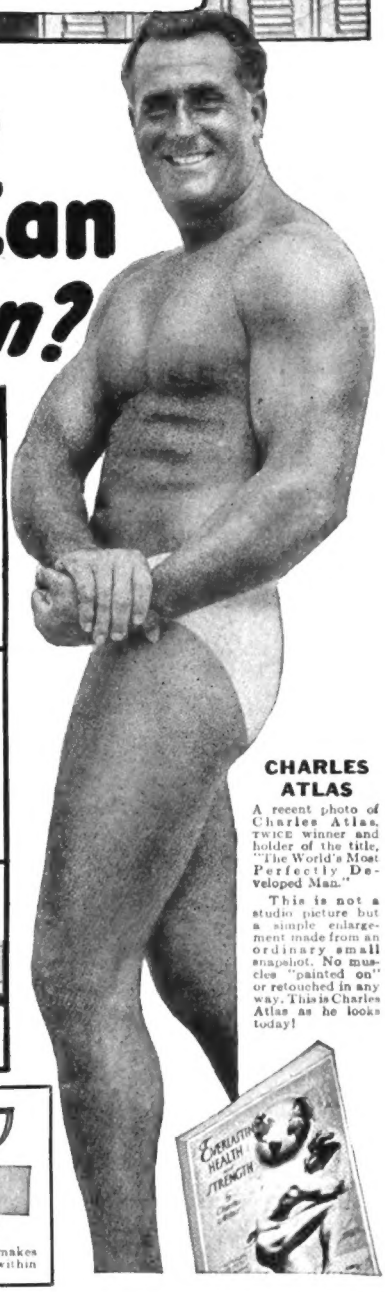

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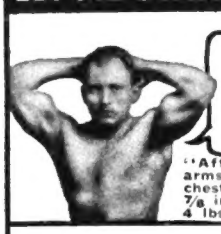
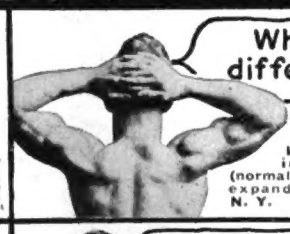
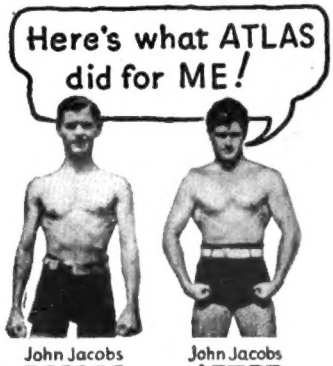


"After ONE WEEK my arms increased 1½ in., chest 2½ in., forearm ⅞ in., and I have gained 4 lbs."—C. S., W. Va.



"Started a week ago. Have put 3½ in. on chest (normal) and 2½ in. expanded."—F. S., N. Y.



"Am sending snapshot of wonderful progress. Certainly recommend you for quick results!"—W. G., N. J.

"Your method gives long, smooth muscle. When I started, weighed only 141. Now weigh 170."—T. K., N. Y.

7-Day TRIAL OFFER

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I will award it, engraved, to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months.

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